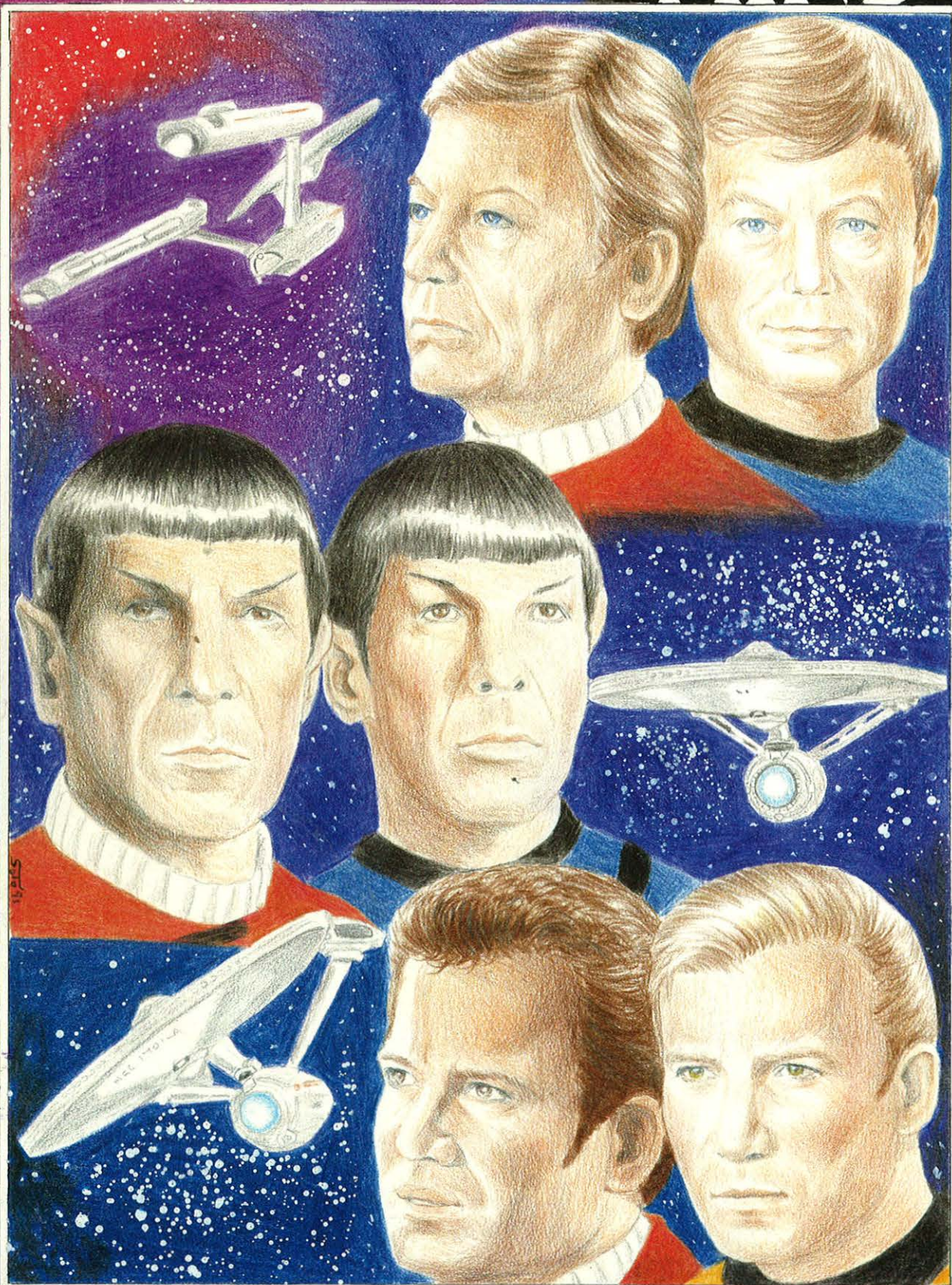


MIND MELD VI



STAR TREK

25TH ANNIVERSARY 1966 - 1991



Stories of heroes and villains,
Of dreamers and poets and fools.
A ship full of brave men and women
Where goodness and righteousness rules.

They gave us their love and their laughter
We shared in their sorrows and tears
Oh, it's been the grandest adventure
Star-sailing for twenty-five years.

*They came to a world that was weary
Disheartened, unable to cope.
They showed us a brilliant star future
And gave us a reason to hope.*

One man with a dream and a vision,
A forum through which he could speak
Created new worlds of enchantment
Transported us there every week.

There were monsters with hearts, who could reason
And beings with absolute power.
We sought to find ultimate answers
Inside of one magical hour.

The crew became friends we would cherish,
The ship was our own safe retreat
The tales gave us moments to treasure
Where the real and the fantasies meet.

A lifetime for some on this journey
Grown up and grown old on the way
Yet, still the stars beacon and challenge
And still they inspire us today.

*Like rare wine the Captain has mellowed,
And Spock is reborn from the tomb.
McCoy learned the love of his comrades
And Earth has been saved from its doom.*

*These timeless companions together
Forever their stories retold,
Transversing the new generations
'Til bright, shiny silver turns gold.*



MIND MELD VI

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF STAR TREK

"The bond between these three is strong..." -- Sybok, Star
Trek V: The Final Frontier





In-Person Price: \$18.00
(plus applicable sales tax)

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*"... You are also my friend.
I have been and always shall be yours."*

Spock
Star Trek II:
The Wrath of Khan

DEDICATION

DeForest and Carolyn Kelley

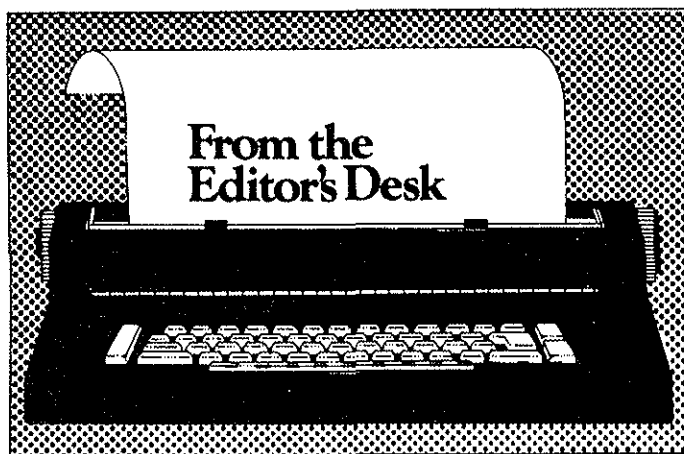
and

the rest of the Star Trek Family.



*Make new friends, but keep the old;
Those are silver, these are gold.
New-made friendships, like new wine,
Age will mellow and refine.
Friendships that have stood the test --
Time and change -- are surely best;
Brow may wrinkle, hair may gray,
Friendship never knows decay.
For 'mid old friends, tried and true,
Once more we our youth renew.
But old friends, alas! may die,
New friends must their place supply.
Cherish friendship in your breast --
New is good, but old is best;
Make new friends, but keep the old;
Those are silver, these are gold.*

"New Friends and Old Friends"
By Joseph Parry



Well, it's time for another editorial... something I thought I wouldn't be writing again after Mind Meld V. However, there's something about the 25th anniversary of Star Trek that brings out the creative juices... and desires for doing another issue.

Actually, the credit (or blame, depending) for this issue belongs to Sue Keenan. Sue is president of the DeForest Kelley Fan Communique and, more importantly, a good friend. On a trip to California to visit her, we were talking about a story I was writing (yes, it's in this issue). She said she knew of a story that hadn't been published that was written by Marian Kelly and if I decided to do another issue, it would probably still be available. Well, she called Marian and yes, the story was still an "orphan" -- and it already had beautiful color artwork. Not only did she find this story for me -- we even went to Marian's to pick the story up so I could read it. I personally think Sue had an ulterior motive... she knew I would like the story and, therefore, would want to print it, along with the color artwork. Well, I couldn't pass this up, could I? So, blame Sue... not me, for this issue of Mind Meld. (Of course, when I got home, Ginna LaCroix' story was in the mail... which was the straw that "broke" the camel's back, so to speak and Mind Meld VI was well on the road to becoming a reality.

This is a special year for Star Trek fans... being the 25th anniversary. I'm sure there will be specials on television and plenty of memorabilia to buy. However, the fact that Star Trek has endured this long says a lot for the show and its creator. It's unfortunate that the IDIC philosophy of Star Trek that is found in fandom is not yet found in society in general. Star Trek fandom is a place where prejudice, discrimination and pessimism is not generally found. It is a comfortable place to be and a great place to find friends with common interests. Fandom knows no boundaries... you will find students, professionals, blue-collar workers... anyone in fandom. We have Gene Roddenberry and the rest of the people involved in Star Trek in the 60's to thank for this.

This brings me to my dedication. While I have dedicated this issue to the Star Trek Family in general, I have singled out De and Carolyn Kelley for a reason. It was because of De Kelley that I was permitted to watch Star Trek when it was first aired in 1966. Because of his western roles, my father recognized him and said... "if he (meaning DeForest Kelley) is in this show, then it can't be too bad." We didn't miss an episode after that. While I was a bit too young to understand the cultural issues being presented at the time, I enjoyed it a lot. Also, I've had the pleasure of meeting the Kelleys and they are wonderful people who believe in the IDIC philosophy. (Hey, they even like my dog!) They are special people and for this reason I wanted to single them out.

Continued...

I need to thank a lot of people. This issue has come together rather quickly. All of my contributors were quick in responding to my desire to have this issue out in 1991 — the 25th anniversary year. And the artists... I can't thank them enough for working with short deadlines (something I'd rather not have to ask artists to do!). In addition, despite her busy schedule, Cheryl Zier took on the proofing job of this zine (yup... blame her for any typos!) Do you get the feeling you can't blame me for anything with this zine? To top it off, Chris Soto came up with an absolutely gorgeous cover. Thanks also go to Bev Volker, who, on two-days' notice, came up with the 25th anniversary poem that is on the inside front cover. That's what I call poetry on demand! I guess it was in the cards for this issue to see print.

I do want to address the cost -- when I was doing Mind Meld in the past, I was lucky enough to have a relative that did the printing for not much over cost and, therefore, I was able to keep the cost at a consistent \$10.00 without the quality of printing suffering. However, he no longer has access to the press and, therefore, I was forced to go to a commercial printer. Since I set high standards for the quality of printing, the cost skyrocketed... not to mention the cost of paper, color printing and the like. I apologize for the cost but believe me when I say I am uncomfortable with it. I only hope you feel it is worth it. If for some reason I find that I have substantially overestimated what I should charge, I intend to make a contribution to the North Shore Animal League after all costs are covered.

Which brings me to my next question. Knowing that the price is going to be in the range of \$15-\$20, do you want a Mind Meld VII? I already have two good stories; however, the mental battling I have done over the cost of this issue has made me wonder if I should go ahead. I need to know from you... the readers... if it is worth it. As of now, I do plan on doing a Mind Meld VII; however should the opinion of my readers indicate otherwise, my mind can be changed.

Anyway, I will let you go and read what you bought to read and hope you enjoy it. And thank you... the readers... because without you there would never be a Mind Meld!

*Qaida
Dandy*



AND NOW...
A NOTE FROM RADAR....

I have to say that I don't like it when my mom does a zine. I don't get enough head scratches as it is... and now she's surrounded by paper and I can't get near her without her yelling at me for walking on it. However, she promises it's almost over and I can't wait! I did want to say that I've met the Kelleys as well and they're pretty special. They even saved me part of their breakfast one day at OktoberTrek. That was REAL neat! Anyway, Mom doesn't know I'm writing this so I'd better get, but I had to put my two cents in!



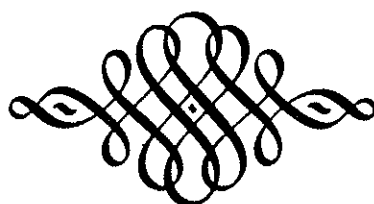
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Inside Front Cover poetry by Beverly J. Volker

Cartoons, pages 102 & 282 -- Mary Mills

Note: Back cover artwork reprinted from Mind Meld I



BROTHERS

By: Diana King

I lost a brother once.
Too late by only minutes
I knelt beside his still-warm body
And had no time for grieving.
Violated and tortured by alien invaders
He'd died in agony,
Yet in his peaceful face
I saw the vast blue skies and golden fields
Of our Iowa youth--
All forever lost.

I lost a brother twice.
Brilliant elder, dazzling in potential
But dismayingly delusional.
Both of us misfits,
I by birth, he by belief.
Lost him first to heresy and exile,
Lost again to alien evil--
Malignant embrace of God-turned-devil--
A sacrificial suicide
To redeem his overweening pride.
Now forever lost.

I lost a brother once,
And bent over his broken rag-doll body
Still wrapped with ahn-woon,
Knowing I had killed him,
Frail human.
The sight iced my plak tow fever
To cold tremors.
His death would summon my own.
Yet we were spared,
For McCoy brought him back.

I lost a brother once.
Seared by nuclear fires
He'd save us all from a madman's revenge.
Helplessly I watched him die,
Inches away, yet unreachable.
I gave him to a newborn world to keep
And turned to fill the void his passing left.
But I was lucky:
McCoy gave him back.

NEVER ALONE



By: Lynn Syck & Laurel Ridener

Art by: Bev Zuk

The last strains of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" drifted away into the darkness and McCoy once again lapsed into the somber mood Kirk had just tried to cajole him out of. He watched the Doctor surreptitiously, not wanting to outright stare, but McCoy seemed totally engrossed in the hypnotic antics of the fire, oblivious to his surroundings.

Kirk, however, was not fooled in the least. Spock was absorbed in playing a soft Vulcan piece, and Kirk moved closer to the Doctor. "Mind if I pull up a patch of ground?"

McCoy looked up, seemingly startled. "Huh?"

"Never mind," Kirk smiled and sat at McCoy's feet. "Want to tell me what's wrong?"

"Wrong?"

"Will you stop answering a question with a question? What the hell's wrong with you?" He kept his voice low but irritation crept in and put an edge to his words he had not intended.

"Are you ticked off at me for some reason?" McCoy's face remained passive and Kirk could detect no laughter in the distant blue eyes.

"I give up. I guess when you're ready to tell me, you will." He stood and moved closer to the campfire and poured himself a cup of coffee.

McCoy stood as well. "I'm going to stretch my legs." His tone was harsh, almost as if he dared anyone to have any objections.

Kirk glanced at Spock and back at McCoy. "It's pretty dark in those woods, Bones." As soon as the words left his mouth, he regretted them.

McCoy's melancholy look turned dark. "I'm a big boy, Captain. I don't need a nursemaid!"

Kirk stared at him, surprised, as well as curious. "I wasn't suggesting you did, Bones" he answered quietly, his words tinged with hurt. "It's just.... "

McCoy locked furious stares with him for a moment, then muttered "Damnation!" and turned on his heel, leaving the profanity hanging between them. Within a few seconds, the trees swallowed him up as if he had never existed. The chill breath of premonition blew across back of Kirk's neck, raising the hairs on his arms. Kirk felt a sudden, almost desperate need to find Bones and get him back to the safety of the camp, to apologize for whatever the hell he had done that had hurt him so badly that he'd had to run away. He tossed the dregs of his coffee into the fire and set his cup down.

"I'm going to follow him, Spock. No sense letting him get lost."

Spock studied him for a moment. "Do you me wish to accompany you, Jim?"

Kirk took a deep breath, scanned the surrounding trees as if trying to see through them right into McCoy's heart, then exhaled slowly. "I don't need a nursemaid either, at least I hope not." His smile softened his words. "Besides, one of us needs to stick around camp to hold down the fort."

The moon was thick and full, brightening the forest with its silver intensity. The trail McCoy had taken was a well-traveled one, clearly marked and easy to follow. Kirk could hear the rustling of bushes as McCoy marched deeper into the woods. As he followed, he tried to move quietly through the forest, not wanting to spook McCoy any more than he already was. The heady scent of broken pine needles floated around him in the cool mountain air. There was a crispness in the air that promised an early winter. In the eerie silence of the forest, the sound of his own breathing seemed loud, almost as if the forest itself were watching, not taking kindly to these star-traveling intruders.

Kirk caught himself letting his mind wander and laughed silently. He was much too old to be conjuring up demons and ghosts and things that went bump in the night. Dealing with McCoy, when he finally caught up with him, would be trouble enough. He would have a lot of explaining to do and he would do it, gladly, but within the safety of camp. Country boy that McCoy was, when it came to the deep forest, he was indeed the proverbial babe in the woods.

The small path ended in a clearing at the base of a majestic pine, but McCoy's trail veered to the left and continued deeper into the trees. "Dammit, Bones," Kirk muttered as he stumbled over roots and low branches. Through the undergrowth, Kirk could see the not-too-distant outline of the mountain. A jumble of boulders at the base stood in mute testimony to the instability of the area.

An odd rumbling began, and Kirk looked to the sky for thunderclouds, seeing nothing but moonlight filtering through the tall pines. The rumbling deepened, vibrating up through the soles of his thick boots, making his knees tingle. With a sick horror, he recognized the terrible, resonating roar — rockslide! He began to run in the direction McCoy had taken, hoping against all odds that the Doctor would have the good sense to turn back and get the hell out of the way. Branches slapped his face and brambles pulled at his legs. He reached the end of the trail and burst into the open at the base of the mountain.

"Bones!" The word screamed from his lips but was drowned out by the roar as huge boulders careened down the side of the mountain.

McCoy stood illuminated by the moon, seemingly frozen by shock or fear. At the last possible moment, McCoy turned to run, but it was too late.

The slide was over almost as soon as it started. Only the uneasy grating of uprooted boulders settling into new places and the continuous clatter of small rocks and gravel sifting through the rock disturbed the night. The sudden quiet was deafening in its intensity. Deep clouds of dust shrouded everything and Kirk had to move carefully over boulders and teetering rocks as he made his way to where he thought McCoy had been standing.

"Bones!" He began digging, frantically pulling at the loose rocks at the top of the slide. He jumped when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to find Spock standing over him, lantern in hand.

Kirk immediately turned back to his work. "He's under here! I got to him too late, dammit!" He was aware of Spock pulling his communicator from his jacket pocket notifying Uhura of the emergency but never stopped his frantic digging. "Glad someone thought to bring his communicator," he muttered. Spock knelt beside him and began moving chunks of rock and rubble.

Moments later, he caught sight of the brown thermal jacket McCoy had been wearing. The dark stains were most certainly blood and they grew larger even as Kirk watched. They dug deeper, clawing away at the debris, unmindful that their own hands were raw and bleeding. Kirk first found the hair, then, after an eternity of savage work, found the beloved face. For one nightmarish moment, he thought surely McCoy must be dead. Then he touched the neck, feeling a faint, fluttery pulse. Alive! Blood poured from myriad cuts, mingling with the dirt, making a thick gory mud. Kirk stripped off his red sweatshirt, removed the soft white shirt he wore under that and used it to gently wipe away the blood and dirt from McCoy's face, making certain air passages were clear.

"Bones?" he whispered, almost sobbing. What seemed like hours later, they had uncovered the Doctor's body enough to know that McCoy was so badly injured that they dare not move him without medical supervision. "Bones! Bones, answer me!"

At almost the same moment, the landing party materialized a few feet away, ghosts of a different sort in the settling dust. Martha Stewart, the young blond doctor just recently assigned to the Enterprise, led the rescue party, followed by several med-techs with digging equipment and a portable stasis generator.

Nodding curtly, the Doctor moved Kirk aside and began giving orders to the techs with the diggers. As soon as enough of the debris had been moved, Stewart ordered the field put in place around McCoy's upper body. It did not take a Surgeon General to know that without stabilizing spine and rib cage, any attempt to move McCoy could be fatal.

The Captain scrambled his way back down the slide to stand by Spock. "Why don't they just beam him up to the ship, Spock? Why is she wasting so much time?"

Spock reported in his usual precise fashion. "Doctor Stewart scanned the area when I first contacted the ship. She felt Doctor McCoy would not survive beaming aboard. There is a shuttle on the way."

Kirk nodded, never taking his eyes from the activity in front of him. It was all he could do to keep from shoving them all away and doing it himself. They seemed to move so slowly. He actually took a step forward but Spock's gentle hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"Leave them to their work, Jim. They must be careful not to cause additional injury. The Doctor is in critical condition."

Critical. That single word stopped him cold, bringing home with amazing finality that this time they just might lose McCoy.

Critical. No games, no second chances, no ancient Vulcan ceremonies pulled out of ancient Vulcan hats.

Never taking his eyes from McCoy's face, Kirk said quietly, "Why now, Spock. We've all been through so much these last few months, and now, just when things are almost back to normal.... " He looked up to meet Spock's eyes. "I don't know if I could stand going through it again. I don't know if I have that kind of strength left."

The sound of the shuttle landing reached them through the trees, followed quickly by the comforting sight of more med-techs with a stretcher and stasis packs. Kirk watched them gently lift the immobilized McCoy free of the slide and place him on the stretcher. Stewart took a moment to check the Doctor's vital signs before nodding the meds toward the shuttle. They moved McCoy quickly back the way they had come, with Kirk and Spock close behind.

Once aboard, Kirk took a seat across the aisle from the bunk where McCoy lay. Stewart hovered over the Doctor, occasionally blocking him from view. Bones was so pale — so still. Kirk felt fear settle in the pit of his stomach as terrifying as that moment when he had known he had lost Spock. The love may be different, he thought, but it was every bit as deep. A warm hand gripped his shoulder, reminding him that he was not alone in his fear, or in his love. He turned to look at Spock seated next to him. Such gestures still amazed him, coming from the reserved Vulcan.

"Dr. McCoy is very strong, Jim. I do not know if you realize just how strong he is. The refusal was an experience some Vulgans would not have survived."

Kirk smiled slightly at Spock's attempt to console him. He looked back to see Stewart standing at McCoy's side, tricorder in hand, studying her patient closely.

"How's he doing?" Kirk asked, unable to hide the fear in his words.

"I have him stabilized for the moment, Captain. It was touch and go for a while. He has multiple internal injuries, a fractured skull and severe spinal trauma. I've ordered the shuttle to Headquarters Hospital. He needs more extensive care than we can give him on the ship."

Kirk heard all that she said but it seemed more than he could absorb. Only one question really mattered. "Will he live?" Plea, question, prayer, he would never know which, just knew he had to have an answer.

Stewart turned and looked back at McCoy. "I haven't known him very long but I don't think he's the sort to give up easily. At least I hope not. He's in for the fight of his life. Literally."

Kirk left her to her work and returned to his seat where he sat silent, staring straight ahead.

The next minutes and hours blurred one into the other. He remembered their arrival at 'Fleet Hospital, McCoy being whisked away by a crowd of strangers, they and their concern being callously set aside, and then hours of waiting, pacing, worrying. Spock sat quietly by, giving his usual calm support. Scotty, Uhura, Sulu and Chekov came and went, all feeling the same sense of helplessness and grief as he did. In the back of his mind, he sort of wondered who was minding the store, but then he realized... it did not really matter. What truly mattered was the man undergoing intensive lifesaving surgery, and the man sitting next to him. Starships and exploring the galaxy meant nothing without them.

Kirk stopped his pacing, returned to face Spock. Words had to be said. But before he had the chance, Dr. Stewart moved briskly through the perpetually swinging doors of surgery, joining them in the waiting area. Kirk stood at near attention.

"How is he?"

Stewart sighed and rubbed her forehead tiredly. She avoided his eyes. "Not good, I'm afraid. We're not sure if the damage to the spinal cord will be permanent. And he's in a deep coma. If he doesn't rally in the next 24 hours.... " The shrug and shake of her head told Kirk more than he wanted to know.

"I want to see him. We want to see him." He turned to include Spock, who now stood beside him.

Stewart shook her head. "I'm sorry, Captain, only family... "

"We are his family, dammit!" It was a truth more certain now than when he had said it at the reception a few short days ago. The same uneasy chill settled in his spine as he read the pity in Stewart's eyes. For McCoy? Certainly not, but for him, possibly.

"I'll take you to the Recovery Unit," she capitulated. "He'll be totally encompassed by monitors, life support units and a stasis field." She hesitated. "He won't be pretty, Captain. The doctors haven't had time to do more than clean up his face, and he was badly battered by the slide."

Kirk only nodded and followed Stewart down the endless corridors of the hospital, very much aware of Spock always at his side.

McCoy was only one of several patients in the Intensive Care Recovery Unit, each bed in an alcove that opened on a central monitoring station. Kirk followed Stewart to the farthest bed. Tubes were everywhere. Monitors on all sides. Blips and beeps Kirk could no more understand than he could speak Vulcan.

And yet, Kirk was only peripherally aware of the monitors and tubes and Stewart saying something about a stasis field. The focus of his attention was McCoy -- so pale, his face terribly bruised and swollen. And still. So very, very still. He reached out to take the slim, unmoving hand but encountered the spongy resistance of the stasis field.

"Bones?" he whispered, not expecting a response but hoping anyway. When he turned to face Spock, his eyes were filled with tears. "Why, Spock? Why now? What was bothering him so badly that he had to leave us and be alone?" The "whys" were followed swiftly by "if onlies" in his mind, but he did not voice them. Spock would say it was illogical to dwell on such things.

"Captain?" Stewart said softly, resting her hand on his arm, pulling him away. "There's nothing you can do here. Go get some rest before you collapse."

He pulled free of her grasp. "I'm all right! It's McCoy who's in danger!"

Spock moved to stand closer to him. "It is a danger he must face alone, Jim. Doctor Stewart will care for him. She also cares for you, and she is correct -- you should rest. It has been 22.6 hours since you last slept."

The old precise statement of fact struck him as comforting somehow and he managed a small smile in response. At the same time, he seemed to really see Spock for the first time in days, saw the evidence of deep stress in the eyes and on the face that not even all of the disciples on Vulcan could hide -- at least not from Jim Kirk.

"And you, my Vulcan friend," he challenged, "look like hell." Spock's response was a raise of both eyebrows.

"Indeed?"

"I think we both need some sleep," Kirk grudgingly acquiesced, still not quite convinced that fatigue was all that was bothering his friend. "A couple of hours, maybe? When he wakes up," -- he nodded toward McCoy, the old glint coming back to his eyes -- "I want to be here. I think the good doctor has some explaining to do."

Kirk shifted his attention to Doctor Stewart. "Doctor, you'll contact me as soon as there is any change in McCoy's condition." He had not meant for it to sound like an order, but it had and he let it stand.

"Yes, of course, Captain," she said, glancing at McCoy's chart yet again. "I don't expect any change for several hours at the earliest, but I promise I will let you know immediately."

Kirk turned again to McCoy. He remembered Bones telling him once that even the deeply unconscious sometimes hear what is said to them, remember it, take it to heart.

"Doctor McCoy, this is your Captain speaking," he said softly, an uncontrollable catch in his voice. "You are hereby ordered to recover -- and quickly. We still have seven days leave time and we need you to show us how to roast the 'marshmelons.'"

They started to leave but at the door, Kirk hesitated and turned to look at his friend, wondering what the next 24 hours would bring.

"Jim... " Spock gently laid his hand on Kirk's forearm. "The Doctor is strong, he will not leave us." Seemingly uncomfortable with such an open expression of his own feelings, Spock turned and moved down the corridor.

Once beyond the ICRU corridors, Spock stopped and turned to Kirk. "You also have not eaten anything in 22.4 hours. Perhaps it would be wise for you to keep up your strength." He waited, one brow arched in a challenge of its own.

Kirk shook his head. "No," he said, even the mere thought of food almost unbearable. "Coffee, maybe." Spock nodded and led the way to the cafeteria.

After a brief visit to the peaceful dining area, Kirk and Spock returned to the small room set aside for them on the surgical floor. Kirk ignored the bed and stretched out in a padded chair. Spock took the chair opposite. As Kirk drifted into an uneasy slumber, strangely enough his last thoughts were of Spock and how very tired he looked.

True to her word, Stewart called Kirk several hours later. McCoy was waking up, drifting in and out of consciousness, once or twice calling out, possibly for the Captain, she could not be sure.

"I'll be right there," Kirk answered softly, looking over at the sleeping Vulcan. It was strange that the merest whisper had not pulled Spock from his rest. The Vulcan seemed exhausted, more so than McCoy's accident should warrant. Kirk decided to let him sleep while he could, and literally tiptoed from the room.

Doctor Stewart met him at the entrance to the Intensive Care Recovery Unit. "He's fully awake now and, for a man just having undergone major surgery, he's asking a lot of questions. I put him off but..."

Kirk shook his head. "McCoy is too smart not to recognize evasion. Tell me the prognosis and I'll break it to him. Maybe it'll be easier coming from a friend."

Stewart's words were a sword through his heart and he had to spend several moments composing himself before he went in to face Doctor McCoy.

The Doctor moaned softly and slowly opened his eyes. Kirk was relieved to see awareness and recognition in them. McCoy had been stabilized enough that the damned stasis field had been shut off. Now, at least he could take his friend's hand.

Kirk pulled a chair beside the bed and sat down, smiling what he hoped was an encouraging smile, and placed his hand over McCoy's. "It's about time you woke up," he chided gently. "Do you know where you are?"

McCoy licked dry cracked lips. "Hos... hospital?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Fleet Headquarters Hospital. Dr. Stewart is in charge of your case and she's taking very good care of you." He knew he was rambling but could not seem to stop himself. He knew as well that he was stalling, delaying the time for reckoning.

"Would you like some water? Dr. Stewart said you could have small sips." McCoy nodded, the ice blue eyes never leaving his face. Kirk held the straw to his lips while he sipped the water. "Better?" McCoy nodded again. "How do you feel?"

McCoy cocked an eyebrow and between ragged breaths, answered as best he could. "How the... hell... should I feel after... half a goddamned mountain... falls on me?"

Kirk smiled, reassured by the familiar cussedness. "You're going to be all right."

Wariness filled the blue eyes. "But?"

Kirk grasped McCoy's hand tighter, needing the physical connection. He took a deep breath. "There was some damage to your spinal cord. It's going to take a lot of patience and therapy to get you on your feet again."

Kirk watched carefully as McCoy took the information and absorbed it. The Doctor's eyes grew large as he tried to move his legs — and could not. Panic replaced the wariness. "No!"

"Easy, Bones, you're going to recover completely, I promise. I wouldn't lie to you, not about that."

McCoy still struggled, trying to move his numb legs. Finally, he gave up, seeming to sink even further into the pillow. "How long before... "

"The doctors tell me it will be four to six weeks."

"Four... to six weeks," McCoy repeated, and laughed harshly. "Well, I guess... that'll teach me."

The words were more to himself than to Kirk and he turned away, no longer meeting the Captain's eyes.

Kirk was instantly suspicious. "What are you talking about, Bones?" For a moment, he did not think the Doctor would answer.

Finally, "I... wanted to teach... you a lesson," McCoy answered, his voice tight and full of rage. "Instead.... "

Kirk felt a knot of fear in the pit of his stomach. There was such deep anger in McCoy's exhausted voice -- more real, genuine anger than the Doctor had ever directed at him in all their years of friendship.

"Teach me? Teach me what, Bones?" he persisted, already halfway knowing the answer, and hating that knowledge.

McCoy looked at him, the flashing blue eyes full of icy fire. "Teach you... how it feels... to have someone you love... have such total disregard for his own life... that you live in mortal dread... of what asinine stunt... he'll pull next! I... was going to 'get lost,' disappear into the woods... let you worry for a change." McCoy stopped to take three gasping breaths, then finished, "Only the mountain... had other... ideas."

Kirk was beyond words. The reality that he had hurt McCoy so deeply that he would resort to such a tactic nearly broke his heart. He was responsible for the Doctor's too-close brush with death -- for his possibly permanent paralysis. The realization made him go weak with regret.

He stood, carefully laying McCoy's hand on the bed, wanting only to be gone from this latest result of his rash and thoughtless nature.

"Bones, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me... " McCoy just stared at him, no forgiveness in his eyes at all and anything more he could have said lodged his throat. He could only turn and flee. He heard McCoy calling to him as the door slid shut between them, but it would take more than mere words to repair the damage he had done to his friend, however unintentional.

At the end of the corridor, Spock waited for him. "How is Doctor McCoy?"

Kirk read great concern in the dark eyes, and something else -- something almost fearful in that Vulcan face he had come to know so well. He buried the feelings of guilt quickly, concerned for the other who now seemed almost as distressed. "Not good," Kirk answered, his voice unsteady. "He's lucky to be alive, but I don't know if he thinks it's such good luck. He has a long way to go."

Spock turned away to look out the waiting room window. The view was of a lovely garden full of flowers but Kirk did not believe Spock was aware of the scenery. His response was almost a whisper. "I, too, have a long way to go."

Spock's voice, so full of sadness and grief, turned his blood to ice. "What do you mean? Where are you going?"

Spock hesitated. "I must return to Vulcan."

Kirk stepped closer but, with the barrage of emotions raging through him, dared not touch the Vulcan. "Why, Spock?"

Spock turned away from the window, to face his captain. "I carry Sybok's katra and I must return it to our ancestral home."

Images flashed through Kirk's mind of Sybok's hand touching Spock's at the last moment before he engaged the alien presence in a death battle. "Why didn't you tell me?" Kirk asked, knowing the question sounded like an accusation. He felt almost betrayed that Spock would keep something so important from him.

"It is a very private thing among Vulcans, Jim, and there was a certain amount of..." his voice trailed off.

"Shame? But you had nothing to be..."

"I allowed my feelings for Sybok to interfere with my duty to you," he said softly, "and that was unforgivable."

Kirk shook his head. "I thought we had that all worked out. He was your brother, Spock. I was angry, sure, but I told you I understood."

The dark eyes glittered in amusement for a split second. "Do you, Captain? Do you really?"

For an eerie moment, the voice was not Spock's, nor the brilliant glitter of amusement in the sable eyes, but Sybok's. Kirk chose to ignore the chills that rippled down his spine. "You're leaving, then, aren't you." It wasn't really a question, but a certainty.

Spock nodded. "In two hours. The John Glenn is able to detour enough to take me." He studied Kirk's face for a moment as if to memorize it and seemed to come to some decision. "I requested permission from the Clan Elders to return Sybok's katra to the Ancient Hall of Thought. They refused."

Kirk understood Spock's sadness even more. It seemed even saving the galaxy and dying a hero's death was not atonement enough for Sybok's rebellion. "What will you do?"

Spock turned back to the window. "I will go to the great desert at Shi'Kahr and release his katra there."

"To be spread upon the wind," Kirk murmured, remembering.

Spock looked at him in surprise. "Apollo. Yes. It is very much the same. Still, I regret that I must leave you alone under the present circumstances."

Kirk sighed deeply. "It all comes down to that damned four letter word, doesn't it? Duty. Yours to Sybok, mine to Bones."

"Duty," Spock repeated. "Will there ever be a time when that word does not come between us?"

The question took Kirk by surprise. It mirrored so precisely his own feelings that he could not speak for a moment. It was not only a beach to walk on that he longed for, he realized, but a friend to walk with him as well.

He smiled. "Perhaps someday. In the meantime, do what you must, my friend, and my thoughts go with you." He stepped closer to Spock. This time, the Vulcan did not retreat. Still, Kirk sensed a gulf opening between them, and fear washed over him. He pulled Spock into his arms, refusing to let it happen. "No Klingons watching this time, Spock." He felt the Vulcan's arms enfold him tightly.

"No, Jim, no Klingons."

Later, after seeing Spock off, he returned to check on McCoy one last time before going home. Doctor Stewart stopped him in the hall outside McCoy's door.

"How's he doing?" Kirk asked before she had a chance to volunteer any information.

Stewart shook her head and smiled ruefully. "I'd always heard that doctors make the worst patients. Whoever said it must have had some hands-on experience with Doctor McCoy."

Kirk laughed. "I can believe that. He's hard to handle under the best of circumstances, and this isn't exactly the best of circumstances. Is there any change?"

"There seems to be some improvement, physically, but mentally... I don't know. He seems distracted somehow, worried. Is there anything you can do? He needs to concentrate all his energy on his recovery, not be worried or concerned about anything else. I suggested mild antidepressants and he suggested smooth Kentucky bourbon. It seems we're at an impasse."

Kirk couldn't help a small chuckle. "I think I can help that situation, Doctor. If you'll excuse me?"

The room was in semi-darkness and McCoy seemed to be sleeping. The only sound was the faint beeps of the monitor tracking his vital signs. Kirk quietly took the chair by the bed and sat watching and waiting. After several minutes, McCoy's eyes fluttered open. "What's this I hear about you asking for bourbon?"

McCoy grimaced and struggled to sit up. "She wanted to pump me full of goddamn anti-antidepressants! I told her the best anti-antidepressant was a bottle of good Kentucky bourbon, but she wouldn't agree." He stopped his useless efforts and lay still. "Quit starin' at me like some bug under a goddamn microscope. Obviously, I'm not going anywhere."

Kirk leaned back in the chair and breathed a deep sigh of relief. The Doctor was still very angry with him, but there was an undercurrent of forgiveness that he sensed and for which he was grateful. He laid his hand carefully on McCoy's arm.

"Bones, you said something earlier about making me realize what I was doing, taking foolish chances, risking my neck. I just want you to know I really do understand. I promise I'll be more careful from here on out. That's not saying something couldn't happen, just that if it does, it won't be because of anything stupid I've done. Scout's honor." He held up his other hand and flashed his most engaging grin. He was pleased to see a tiny glint of amusement light the Doctor's eyes.

McCoy harrumphed. "Bull. I'll believe that when I see it. And besides, you were never a Boy Scout."

The grin widened. "Are you sure?"

"Go on, get outta here so I can rest. And try to stay out of trouble 'til they cut me loose from here."

Their eyes met and the truth of McCoy's situation was once more between them. Perhaps he would never be "cut loose" and they would have to change the course of their lives yet again.

"It's going to be all right, Bones. We're going to get through this thing together. We've beaten worse odds."

McCoy closed his eyes, and turned his head. "Don't let that damned Vulcan hear that...." he said tiredly.

Kirk slipped quietly out of the room and returned to his empty apartment. He paced long into the night, feeling uneasy and lost and very much alone.

Four grueling weeks later, James Kirk sat nursing a drink in front of his fireplace. The flickering warmth did nothing to dispel the chill and gloom of the thick night fog that blanketed the entire city. It seemed to hover outside his window like some lost and hungry soul seeking entrance. The only sounds were the crackling of logs and the lonesome foghorns sounding in the harbor. He shivered. Before, the fog had always been a part of the sea, and the sea was a part of him. But tonight, the fog unsettled him as if there was something hiding in its mists, something waiting just for him.

He shook his head and moved away from the window. Much of his anxiety was concern for Spock. There had been no word since he left, although surely he must have reached Vulcan before now. Only so much delay could be charged up to slow ships and paperwork. With the new rapport between them, he knew Spock would have contacted him if he possibly could. The thought that he possibly could not was even more

frightening -- what could have happened to Spock or be happening to him on his home world that would make it impossible to contact a worried friend?

And McCoy was not much better. Oh, physically he was on the mend, with Doctor Stewart harrying him every step of the way. For a doctor who knew the importance of regular therapy, McCoy could be as illusive as a virgin at spring festival when it came to therapy time. But there was still something not right between them, as if an invisible chasm of distrust now separated them, unbreachable by even their long years of friendship. Could it still be just simple anger? Or was there something more?

The begging emptiness of the fog only amplified his feelings, sending him pacing yet again. He freshened his drink, took one sip, and returned it to the kitchen. "This is ridiculous," he muttered. He had battled Gorns and Klingons -- he sure as hell was not going to let a little San Francisco fog get the best of him.

He reached for a light jacket, dimmed the lights, and left the apartment, not in the least bit aware of where he was going, only knowing that he had to move. Picking a direction at random, he began walking, hands tucked in his pockets and his head bent low. The night was chilly with early autumn and he was glad once more that the city's residents had chosen natural weather over the controlled type available from the Department of Environmental Control. It said something for the pioneer spirit of the city that had begun its history with pirates and the Barbary Coast and continued gloriously into the 23rd Century.

He looked up, mentally placing the Enterprise, searching, but the fog obscured the stars. The only illumination were the street lights that reflected on the wet pavement down both sides of the street, which was nearly deserted at this late hour. Sticking his hands deeper into his pockets, he strode quickly on, no particular destination in mind. The deep silence of the fog comforted him somehow, obscuring even the sounds of the distant bay.

The muffled solitude fit his frame of mind. He had some thinking to do, some answers to be found, some decisions to be made. His life had come full circle, it seemed. He had his ship. He had McCoy. And he had Spock. From something so incredibly complicated had come something so incredibly simple -- simple and beautiful. The three of them -- together -- forever.

Now, the question he faced tonight -- wanted to get sorted out in his own mind first before presenting it to Spock and McCoy was -- should they stay in Starfleet, perhaps pushing their luck once too often, or should they take this wondrous gift they had been given, retire, and with as much dignity as they could muster, run not walk to the remotest corner of the remotest quadrant. And do what? Something. Anything. Between the three of them, they had the resources to be anything they wanted to be, do anything they wanted to do.

He smiled. Even purchase a small ship equipped with a shuttle so McCoy would not have to face a transporter, especially a small private model even twitchier than the Enterprise's own.

His entire attention focused inward, he was at first unaware of the dark figure that stalked him down the other side of the street, hiding in the shadows, coming nearer with every step.

Only at the last possible moment did a sixth sense warn him. He turned in time to see the looming hulk behind him, to see the deadly glint of metal as it flashed downward. Warding off the blow, he felt the blade cut into his arm and slide down the bone. Excruciating agony kicked his survival instincts and Starfleet training into action. He drove his head into the assailant's chest, causing him to stumble but not fall. Before he could renew his defense, Kirk felt the knife plunge deep into his chest, ribs cracking from the crushing blow. He staggered back and fell, clawing at the knife as white-hot pain spread, blossomed, and grew within him until it crowded out his very breath.

The dark figure loomed over him, then kicked him savagely in the ribs. Nearly unconscious, Kirk watched as a hand reached down and grasped the knife, twisted it, and slowly pulled it free.

Centimeter by centimeter Kirk could feel the blade scrape past his broken ribs. However horrible the pain had been before, now it doubled and a cry of agony was wrenched from him. He curled into the pain, clutching at his chest.

A harsh sound filtered down to him. Laughter, thick guttural -- not human. He sought the identity of his attacker, fought to focus his eyes as the hood of the black cloak was pushed back. Even in the darkened street, even dying as he surely must be, he recognized Klaa's harsh visage. "You... bastard," he choked, blood streaming from his mouth.

The Klingon squatted down beside him, wiping the bloodied knife on the Starfleet jacket. "So, Kirk, now you pay for your crimes against us," Klaa barked. "I know you are a great warrior, and that you do not fear death... for yourself." His leering smile stretched into a gloating snarl. "So I have executed those closest to you. Your First Officer lies rotting on the sands of Vulcan, and your doctor has -- by now -- been butchered in his bed."

Kirk's battered mind refused to accept what Klaa had told him at first -- this could not be happening, not here, safe in Federation space. Yet here he lay, dying, testimony that even Earth was not all that safe. The Klingon's words had the bloody taste of truth about them. Klaa was perfectly capable of arranging anything, Federation space be damned. Tears tracked their way down his cheeks. "No!"

Klaa grinned in satisfaction at the tortured denial torn from him. "For my clansman, Kruge, I have struck the first blow," he said, raising the knife again. "And for my humiliation at your hands, Kirk, I strike the last."

Kirk tried to turn from the descending blade, but had no strength to move, and not really sure that he wanted to. He could only watch as the dagger, already stained once with human blood, descended with horrible finality to be plunged into him once more. "Please, God, no! Not when we're so close!" his heart cried out as the night engulfed him, smothered him, took him. In the past, he had been able to reach out, to seek Spock and McCoy. Now they too were dead, or dying, and life had no meaning for him at all -- none. His soul withered until the center of his entire universe was agony and terror and the terrible knowledge that this time he was alone....

....fear and pain flooded Spock of Vulcan as he stood on the red desert of Shi'Kahr. Fear and pain, and an icy desolation not his own. Once before on Vulcan, he had sensed this mind, had reached out to it. Now it seemed to be reaching out to him, but blindly, without focus or intent, wanting only to spread itself upon the solar winds and die. He fell to his knees, grasping his head with

both hands, trying to reach back, to help, somehow to sustain, sensing as never before a desperate hopelessness and helplessness. Jim Kirk was dying light years away, violently and very much alone....

....blood saturated the shirt in McCoy's nightmare, and he bolted awake, grasping his chest wildly, feeling the hot blood leeching from his body, his fingers clawing at the pain that ripped him open. He was cold, clammy, going into shock, terrifyingly alone, alone -- no, not he, someone else. Someone was dying and he was experiencing the last moments of desolation and emptiness before becoming lost in the raging pain. His first thought was Spock, some remnant of the katra allowing him to feel Spock's pain. Yet Spock's agony was but a mirror of the same agony he felt, reflecting yet another's desperate pain. It wasn't Spock -- it was Jim!

"Jesus help us!" McCoy gasped, throwing back the covers, grateful the monitors and night nurses were a thing of the past. The last week of therapy and treatment had gotten him on his feet, however unsteady those feet might be. He had been due to be released in a couple of days to recuperate in Jim's apartment. He had intended to make his peace with his Captain -- and his friend -- do so some explaining of his own. But now -- a wave of blackness rolled over him and he reached out to steady himself against the wall before finally reaching the closet. He was struggling into his clothes when the door to his room opened and Doctor Stewart entered.

"Doctor McCoy! What are you doing?" Stewart demanded, stunned to see the still weak doctor apparently leaving.

But he did not, could not answer. There was no time. Jim had no time. Jim needed him... they needed him! He moved through the door.

"Where do you think you're going?" she persisted, taking hold of his arm.

"Let go of me," he commanded, jerking his arm free.

'Go to him! Now! Hurry....'

The words, in high Vulcan, beat at him with their terrible urgency. He was aware of Doctor Stewart's voice following him, ordering him back to bed but he brushed her words away as unimportant, unreal somehow and utterly meaningless.

Out into the night he shuffled, down darkened dockside streets, heart beating wildly to a Vulcan pulse.

'We are losing him! Faster!'

Something was leading him, driving him, pushing him on.

'Wait for us, Jim, please hold on....'

Cold crept through Kirk's veins, replacing the precious blood that seeped away, saturating his clothing, pooling in the wet dirty street beneath him. The pain was a dull weight that pressed him down, taking his breath away. He was dying, and he knew it with a certainty he had never felt before.

He wanted to tell McCoy he was sorry and Spock that he loved him. But they were dead and he was alone, alone as he had always known he would be. The tears flowed freely, not tears of pain, for he was beyond that now, but tears of regret. Perhaps he would find them again in whatever lay beyond. Perhaps only in death would they finally be together, as they were meant to be.

Captain James T. Kirk took one tremulous, tiny breath, thought of stars and starships, of friendships won and lost, and gladly gave himself up to the haven of death that awaited him.

McCoy squinted through the dim foggy light. Just ahead, huddled a little beyond the misty circle of light, something lay in the street, curled up and unmoving. McCoy's breath came in short, panting gasps as he half-ran, half-stumbled the last few yards.

He knelt in the wet street, eyes locked on the still form. Behind him, he heard Stewart's approach, heard her gasp of horror when she illuminated the grisly scene with a small light from her kit, heard the whir of her mediscanner. The slick liquid he knelt in was Jim's blood. But he had known that. He knew too that there was no pulse. And he knew that Jim Kirk was not dead.

'Touch his face, McCoy, open our mind.'

McCoy placed his hands on the familiar face, a sense of calm coming over him, a calm most certainly not his own.

'Jim, we're here, we're with you.'

There was only darkness within Jim's mind, a cold, hollow emptiness wherein his soft call echoed and echoed and echoed until it frightened McCoy. They were too late, that gallant mind was gone...

'No! He is here. We must reach for him.'

McCoy could feel Stewart pulling at him, trying to loosen his hands, telling him it was too late, that Jim Kirk was dead and to let go.

'It is not too late, McCoy... reach, reach deeply.'

...and then they were back in the darkness of Jim's mind. There was no point of reference, no path to follow, except their hearts. McCoy headed down, deeper into the void, seeking the depths that only a dying mind would find. He knew that it really was one for all this time. Either they would all survive or none would. And that was as it should be.

Each level they entered became darker, thicker, more difficult to traverse. Lifelessness hung like mute trappings in the graveyard of the mind. The great expanse of Jim's unconscious became foreboding, almost impossible to cross.

After eons, after crossing each darkening level, after endless searching, in the furthest hollow carved out by some childhood nightmare, they found Jim's essence, so fragile. In that moment, McCoy's heart broke, and he wondered if, he, too, wanted to live.



'Jim?' he called out.

The dim gold essence stirred, began to coalesce, then settled back. There had been no struggle, no valiant efforts to reach for them. It began to fade.

'I forbid it! Return to us!'

The sustaining blue essence that was McCoy and the mighty silver essence that was Spock both reached out to their dying Captain with all the strength and love they had to offer, pleading with him to live, to reach for them and be one with them.

They received no answer.

'He does not wish to live, Doctor. We must return before we lose him.'

McCoy, gently enfolding the Captain within his own essence, began to move, to reach outward, then stopped. Panic filled his mind, exploding forth from the black silence, slamming into their minds.

'Spock! I can't see! Where are we!'

At the sound of the Doctor's terror, Spock's mind reached out, wrapping itself carefully around the Doctor, drawing both the Doctor and his precious burden closer to the pulsing center of his being, to a center that was all of Vulcan and all of Earth combined.

'Protect him, Doctor,' the Vulcan commanded.

Then, with a single mighty push outward, Spock began their dangerous journey back, traversing the labyrinths of Kirk's mind, rising level after level through the darkness to the light until at last they were

conscious as McCoy opened his eyes, totally unaware that he had ever shut them. He blinked once, swallowed hard, afraid to look down. Was it warmth he felt under his hand? Or wishful thinking?

Doctor Stewart was kneeling on the other side of Kirk's body, a look of sheer disbelief on her face. "I'll be damned," she muttered as the mediscanner in her hands suddenly came to beautiful chirping life. Startled, she looked at McCoy.

"I don't understand it, Doctor, he was dead... I mean... "

She stopped stuttering and used her communicator to arrange for direct beam into Starfleet Surgery.

Softly into McCoy's mind came the sweet sounds of the distant voice. 'He could not die, he was never alone.'

McCoy smiled, nodded, ignoring Stewart's unvoiced questions.

'None of us were.'

And in the high desert of Shi'Kahr, Spock of Vulcan felt the tears drying on his cheeks, and he smiled as well.

A MAJOR CRISIS AMONGST THE URSUS MAJOR MINERS

By: Kay Stagg

The Enterprise had been out on duty for seven months and all the crew members and officers alike were looking forward to ten days' shore leave on Star Base Seventeen. However, before they could take their shore leave, they had been ordered to investigate a mining colony on the planet Ursus Major, where trouble with the miners had brought production to a halt.

Kirk ordered his First Officer and Chief Medical Officer to the transporter room. He was already there and waiting with Spock when Doctor McCoy finally walked in.

"What's all this about, Jim?" he asked.

Kirk sighed. "A mining dispute!" he replied, his voice implying just what he thought of Starfleet's latest mission. "All the miners are in an uproar because someone removed their tools during their lunch break. And they haven't been able to report back to work since."

"What! For goodness sake, can't the planet authorities do anything about it?"

"Negative," replied Spock. "Although outwardly the miners of Ursus Major have a friendly, almost childlike appeal, they are known to be ferocious when aroused and difficult to control."

"I've never heard of them," McCoy replied.

"You've never heard of them?" interrupted Scott, who was waiting to beam them down. "They are difficult and that's a fact. There are so many different races... there's Asian, Sloth, Brown, Sun, Kodiak and Black."

"You can add Spectacled and Polar to that," Kirk joined in. "The problem is that during the winter months, they all go to sleep so the Mining Authorities have got to get them working again soon, because their winter months start in just seven weeks."

"Well, I've never heard anything like it. Sounds like something out of a fairy tale," muttered McCoy. "Surely there is someone else down there who can deal with it."

"You would have thought so," Kirk agreed. "But we have our orders so let's go and find out what the problem is. Gentlemen," he said, indicating the transporter pads. He looked at Scott and smiled. "Energize, please."



They materialized in the transport area of the mine which, though vast and filled with equipment and machinery, remained ominously quiet. Grouped to one side were a deputation of miners. A Kodiak, known to be the biggest of the Ursus Major Miners, came over and stood in front of Kirk. Weighing almost four hundred kilograms, he towered over the Human, dwarfing him and everyone else in the landing party.

Both Spock and McCoy moved closer to their Captain as if to give him protection. To the rear of the Kodiak were a number of Spectacled and Sun miners and they too looked anything but friendly, although even Kirk had to admit a certain appeal about them all.

McCoy meanwhile was looking at them all in deep amusement. His face suddenly lit up. "Teddy Bears!" he said.

"Agreed, Doctor, but it might be wise to keep it to yourself," Spock pointed out.

McCoy had already noticed the huge fangs which glistened in the Kodiak's mouth, and he could not help but silently agree.

Kirk coughed slightly and although he felt rather foolish, he introduced himself. "I am Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise. I understand you have a problem." He waited, hoping fervently that the subcutaneous universal translator would work.

"That is correct," growled the Kodiak. "About fourteen days ago, we all went off to have our lunch and when we got back every single one of our picks were gone and we haven't been able to work since."

"I see," murmured Kirk. "Have you had any problems like this before?"

"No," snarled and growled the other miners.

A chuckle from McCoy made Kirk turned around. "Er, Jim," McCoy whispered as quietly as he could. "You could say that that was the day the teddy bears had their picks nicked."

Kirk bit his lip to stop himself from laughing and Spock closed his eyes in disbelief.

Kirk coughed again to clear his throat. "We'll make a thorough investigation into this. In the meantime, I am sure my engineer can manufacture you some more. It won't take long," and he exchanged a mischievous grin with McCoy and said, "and then you can all take your pick."



KOBAYASHI MARU

By: Ginna LaCroix

"I don't believe in the no-win scenario."
I still see the look of disbelief on Saavik's face
As I spoke those words,
The same disbelief that I know was mirrored in my own
When I first saw Spock slumped
Dying,
Because of his own solution for the test.
My belief momentarily wavered
As I watched my friend --
My other half --
Die as no man should be asked to die,
Blind and alone.
A test of character it is called,
It called again
And this time it took my ship,
My life,
My reason for being.
"My god, Bones, what have I done?"
Realizing as I spoke that no one takes the test
Without losing.
I had gained Spock
Only to lose her, and the son I would never know.
"Do not approach Earth!"
There was no precedent for this crisis,
No book to follow,
The test loomed large.
I gambled as I had years ago
And as a result my friend was returned to me,
And although I was stripped of rank,
The Enterprise again was mine.
So now when the question is asked
I answer with my truth.
I do not believe in the no-win scenario,
For you see,
I won.



UNSPOKEN TRUTHS

By: Mary Rottler &
Lynn Syck

Art by: Chris Soto



Dr. Leonard McCoy shoved his tray away and leaned back in his chair to watch the Captain, who sat alone at a table across the mess hall from him.

James Kirk had arrived a few minutes before, barely glancing around as he went directly to the wall unit, selecting a sandwich and coffee. He had yet to eat the sandwich, sipping his coffee while he studied a set of printouts in front of him.

McCoy drummed his fingers lightly on the table as he considered and rejected several theories as to the reason for Kirk's continuing bad mood. He was tempted to approach him one more time. Maybe this time the Captain would trust him and open up. The Doctor sighed. The angry confrontation between Kirk and him this morning should have convinced him that talking to the Captain was not the answer.

Lt. Marks was approaching the Captain and McCoy tensed as he waited for Kirk's response to being interrupted. The redheaded Lieutenant was well liked for his cheerful personality and caring attitude. McCoy knew he would not be able to hold his temper if Kirk tongue-lashed the Irishman. The Doctor had received several reports of the Captain's angry outbursts, but so far he had only seen Kirk's irritability and snappishness. He had yet to witness any of the outrageous behavior the crew had reported.

Kirk frowned as he looked up at the Lieutenant. McCoy narrowed his eyes, prepared to intervene if necessary. Then the Captain smiled, nodding his head in response to the whatever Lt. Marks was saying. McCoy relaxed, using the opportunity to continue his observation.

The Captain had become increasingly tense and moody over a period of weeks. McCoy speculated again on the possible cause, wondering for the hundredth time if the recent events involving the Captain's amnesia and the death of his wife, Miramanee, were the problem. Kirk had refused to discuss her or his time on the planet with the Doctor. McCoy noted Kirk's face was beginning to look leaner with circles under his eyes. More evidence that he was not sleeping or eating properly. The Doctor shifted, not liking where his thoughts were taking him. If the Captain's black mood continued for much longer, McCoy was going to have to pull rank and order a physical.

Kirk was still talking to Lt. Marks. The Captain's smile had faded and he was staring up at Marks with an almost wistful expression. The lieutenant leaned closer and said something that made Kirk laugh suddenly. McCoy closed his eyes briefly, letting the

pleasant sound flow over him. It was possible he was listening to too many rumors. Perhaps it was not as serious a problem as he thought.

Kirk's suddenly loud, angry voice startled McCoy. "Spock, can't I have a few minutes peace without you interrupting?"

Spock stood stiffly at Kirk's side. Lt. Marks was rapidly disappearing out the door.

Spock's tone was the very essence of glacial formality. "You requested that I show you these reports as soon as they were completed, sir."

Kirk clenched his fists, his face flushing with anger. "If you'd been more efficient with this report the first time, I wouldn't have to waste my time with this now. I thought Vulcans were supposed to be competent." The Captain practically sneered as he said this, bringing McCoy instantly to his feet.

"Jim!" he snapped, moving quickly to face him. "This isn't the place for this. I suggest we go somewhere more private."

The Captain's face hardened, his eyes flaming as he glared at McCoy. "You suggest! You're interfering where you don't belong. Get the hell out of my way."

McCoy's mouth gaped open as Kirk shoved him back and stormed out of the mess hall, leaving a stunned silence behind him. He swallowed a couple of times, trying to get his voice to work. Spock, however, was not similarly affected and used the opportunity to escape. He was striding from the room before the Doctor had begun to recover.

"Spock! Wait!"

Spock turned, his face a careful mask covering any expression, except for the glittering hard eyes. "Doctor, I am urgently needed in the computer section."

McCoy's gaze held the black eyes, and finally he nodded. He followed the retreating Vulcan at a much slower pace, his thoughts turbulent and troubled. It was time to perform one of the more unpleasant duties of a CMO and officially question the mental stability of the Captain.



In less than 24 hours, McCoy approached the Captain's quarters, documentation in hand. Pushing the door buzzer, he squared his shoulders, knowing the coming battle was not going to be easy.

Spock was there, as McCoy had planned. He stood at stiff attention across the desk from Kirk. The Captain was scowling, pulling his eyes from Spock to glare at McCoy.

"Yes, Doctor?"

"Captain, you will report to sickbay in one hour for a complete physical. My reasons are official and logged." McCoy held up a disk. "According to regulations, you cannot refuse."

The glittering eyes widened, rage flaring in the hazel depths. "And exactly what are you threatening me with if I do refuse?"

"Removal from command based on observation of your behavior and command decisions," McCoy said softly.

Kirk slammed his hand down on the desk, standing abruptly. Spock took a swift step forward, almost as if he expected the Captain to strike McCoy.

"Captain, I believe it would be beneficial... "

Kirk narrowed his eyes at Spock, all his rage now directed at the Vulcan. "You traitorous dog! You can't even get this report right and you think I need an exam? Here," he said, all but throwing the tape at Spock. "Take this damn thing and correct it by the time I'm finished with McCoy in sickbay. Dismissed."

McCoy froze, not sure he had heard right. Kirk was agreeing to the exam without an argument. He snapped his jaw shut, pulling himself abruptly together as he noticed Spock about to leave.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Spock. I have another reason for being here. And I wanted to discuss it while you were both in the same room."

Spock stopped at the door, his eyes were wary as he looked at McCoy. "Yes, Doctor?"

McCoy raised an eyebrow and waited until the Vulcan rejoined them. Kirk sat back down, gesturing to McCoy that he had the floor. The Doctor began, "Captain, I don't know what's wrong with you, but you can bet your last credit I'm going to find out. I'm here now not to discuss your behavior, but how it's affecting your crew. I'm concerned particularly about your First Officer. The physical I ran this morning showed... "

"That is confidential information, Doctor," Spock interrupted coldly. "You have no right to discuss this with the Captain."

For just a moment, McCoy caught a startled glance from Kirk to Spock. But just as quickly, the hazel eyes met his own with ill patience.

Frowning, he turned to Spock, meeting the black eyes evenly. "I have every right when it concerns a member of this crew and his health. Especially when it's a direct result of stress inflicted by the Captain."

"Spock's a big boy, Doctor," Kirk snapped. "If he can't handle the pressure then he'd better request a transfer."

"Jim! What the hell has gotten into you?" McCoy asked, stunned by the force of Kirk's words. He stared at the Captain. "Don't you even care what's wrong with Spock?"

Kirk turned his chair, staring at Spock for several seconds. McCoy frowned again, feeling almost as if there was a communication he was missing. What was going on here?

The Captain again faced McCoy, his face closed and hard. "I'm waiting, Doctor."

"Waiting! In case you've forgotten, I asked you a question which you still haven't answered." McCoy folded his arms across his chest, letting Kirk know he was not going to weasel out of this discussion.

Spock unexpectedly entered the fray. "The Captain's concerns have no relevance. And if you intend to pursue that subject, I will leave."

Before McCoy could open his mouth to reply, Kirk snapped, "You're not going anywhere, Mr. Spock. Dr. McCoy, you haven't finished your report on my First Officer. Please do so, or leave me alone -- my time is valuable."

"Valuable!" McCoy exploded. This was the final straw, it was time for Kirk to face some unpleasant facts, whether Spock liked it or not. He repeated more softly, "Valuable. You can thank your First Officer that you have any time at all. If it wasn't for his actions, you'd be dead right now along with Miramanee's whole tribe. Spock nearly killed himself trying to save you from that asteroid, driving himself the entire fifty-nine days. He barely ate or slept, losing over six kilos. Then he had to keep this ship going while you recovered from the concussion and injuries sustained on the planet. And when you took that unplanned leave time, Spock virtually collapsed, having pushed his body far past his own Vulcan limits. We spent the next few days building up his depleted reserves and then... "

"Dr. McCoy," Spock interrupted. "Is there a point to this? I see no reason to listen to you prattle... "

"My dear Mr. Spock," McCoy's ice blue eyes held Spock's cold black ones steadily. "If you had informed the Captain of your physical this morning, as you led me to believe you would, then this 'prattle' would not be necessary."

"If you will remember... " Spock began before Kirk interrupted.

"That's enough. I read the reports and they did not include the details of my First Officer's collapse. Which makes me suspicious of a conspiracy to keep this from me. Is there a point to all this?"

"You're damned right there's a point to all this. Jim, can't you see what you're doing? The whole ship's going to hell in a hand-basket, and you can't push hard enough."

"It's my job to push," Kirk said defensively.

"But not like this. You've been impossible to please, no matter what anyone does. And Spock seems to be at the top of your hit list -- you're driving him to the point of total exhaustion." McCoy held his hand up, gesturing at Kirk. "I won't have that. Jim, he's not ready for it. He's lost three kilos of the weight we fought to put back on him. His reaction times are down nearly fifteen percent and his chemistry is... "

"Doctor, you will cease this. You both forget I am Vulcan and can tolerate a higher stress level. There is no cause for concern." Spock stepped closer to the two men.

"Jim, if you buy that then I'll... " McCoy started but was interrupted by Kirk.

"I don't listen to any officer whose reaction time is down that much and doesn't report it to me immediately. You're both on report for dereliction of duty. Mr. Spock, you will report to sickbay immediately and cooperate fully with McCoy. Dismissed."

McCoy ignored the icy glance Spock favored him with and waited until the door closed behind the Vulcan. Kirk had turned to his computer, his expression stormy.

"Jim?"

"I believe you were dismissed, or do you wish to be written up for insubordination as well?"

McCoy ground his teeth together with effort. He was not going to end up in a shouting match like yesterday morning. He marched to the door, but stopped. His fists clenched and he slammed one into the wall in frustration. "Dammit Jim, I thought we were friends. Why won't you talk to me? Is it Miramanee? Do you realize just how close your chief medical officer is to recommending that you be relieved of command? Please, talk... "

"Dr. McCoy, you seem to have a problem obeying orders. I will report to sickbay in one hour. You will not threaten me again on my ship, unless you have a desire to see how fast you can be transferred. Now, see to Mr. Spock since you seem to be so concerned with his health, and quit harassing me."

"Jim... "

Kirk slammed a switch on his desk. "Security, report to my quarters."

McCoy allowed the shock and hurt he felt at Kirk's words to show, willing the Captain to respond. But there was no expression in the wintry cold eyes that met his. McCoy shook his head, more hurt than he wanted to admit.

McCoy reluctantly headed back to sickbay. Now he had to prepare to deal with Spock's anger, although the Vulcan would be insulted by the suggestion that he felt the emotion.

McCoy glanced back at the closed door to Kirk's quarters. He had not realized just how dependent he had become on the Captain -- not only for his advice but for his friendship. He felt as if he were treading water in the middle of a large stormy ocean without that solid support.

The turbolift doors closed behind him, and McCoy turned his thoughts to the waiting Vulcan. Perhaps he could enlighten him, since he was a captive audience, and could not escape the Doctor's clutches.

McCoy grinned faintly. Considering the Vulcan's presence was ordered by the Captain, he could threaten Spock with any number of uncomfortable treatments in order to get him to talk and feasibly use the Captain's order to back him up.

Thoughtfully he entered the lift, the smile disappearing. It would not matter what he tried. If Spock refused to cooperate, then McCoy knew he would get no further information about the Captain. He frowned. What the hell was going on?

Captain Kirk remained sitting at his desk, shoulders slumped. The hazel eyes were no longer angry as he watched the door for several seconds, fully expecting McCoy to storm back through. When nothing happened, he sighed, rubbing his face wearily. He was ready for this whole farce to be over, except... Kirk looked around the room, his gaze resting not on the objects but the walls themselves. It was highly unlikely he would return here, and in his crew's mind and Starfleet's he would probably be branded a traitor.

A grim smile crossed his lips as his eyes fell on the chessboard, where Spock and he had sat only moments before McCoy had entered and interrupted their game. His one piece of sanity throughout this whole mess was the Vulcan even though he had worried himself about the workload Spock had taken on. He had asked Spock several times about his health and had been reassured there was no need for concern.

He should have realized... especially with the noticeable weight loss on the already lean Vulcan. Kirk narrowed his eyes. For a moment, he had not had to pretend to be angry when McCoy had informed him Spock had kept the truth from him. The whole mission was in jeopardy now and Kirk had no one he could confide in to straighten this mess out. Lives were at stake.

Sighing, he checked the chronometer, grimacing. At least this new problem was sure to send his blood pressure soaring. Now for the final act he had planned earlier to add to McCoy's suspicions that his Captain was rapidly sliding over the edge of sanity. He pulled the bottle of Saurian brandy from his desk drawer where he had hidden it away this morning. He frowned. He was officially on duty, and no matter how necessary this was, Kirk disliked the thought of it.

"Damn!" He snapped, pulling the top loose, pouring a generous portion into his glass. Defiantly he drank half the glass without stopping, ignoring the sting of tears it brought to his eyes. "Damn sealed orders and the half-assed Admiralty who give them from the safety of their pristine offices."

The glass was soon empty, and Kirk stood, his head whirling already from the rapid intake of the potent brandy. Staring at the glass, he allowed some of his frustration to surface and threw it across the room to crash resoundingly against the far wall.

His eyes fell back on the chessboard. "Damn you, Spock, why didn't you tell me?" he whispered into the silence before turning and striding from the room.

It was time to put on his maniac act for McCoy.



The Doctor had just escorted Spock to a bed for a few hours rest in one of the recovery cubicles. Now, he escorted the sullen, angry captain to the exam table. He was not looking forward to the next hour with Kirk.

He ignored the whiff of alcohol, feeling his heart sink lower. McCoy had heard reports of his drinking on duty but had hoped it was not true. For him to show up for a physical with even a minute amount of alcohol in his system was only a confirmation of how Kirk's mental stability was deteriorating.

Exactly one hour later, McCoy handed a towel to the Captain, grabbing another one to use on his own sweating face. He ordered Kirk to get dressed and then meet him in his office. Kirk scowled but nodded in response.



The Doctor made a detour to check on the First Officer, who lay on the bed, eyes open. "The object of this is to get some rest. In order to do so, you have to close your eyes, Spock," McCoy could not resist drawling.

The black eyes flicked from the ceiling to McCoy. "I was resting, Doctor."

McCoy nodded, studying the intravenous solution infusing into the Vulcan. "If you say so. I would suggest actually sleeping though, for the longer you resist it, the longer you'll be here. You won't be released until I'm satisfied with your readings," he added softly and then turned and headed for his office.

Kirk was waiting at his office door, watching McCoy's approach with a frown. The Doctor prepared himself for some sarcastic attack from the Captain because of his delay. Instead Kirk's voice was soft, catching McCoy's full attention. "How is Mr. Spock? I thought he would be here."

"He is. Back there," McCoy jerked his thumb over his shoulder towards Spock's cubicle.

Kirk's eyes followed his thumb. "Will he be all right, Bones?"

McCoy felt a jolt of pleasure at Kirk's quiet use of his name. Maybe there was hope after all. "He just needs rest, Jim. Spock seems to forget his human half sometimes can't keep up with the Vulcan in him. The crisis last month pushed him way past even his Vulcan limits."

"If I had known he was sick, I never would have..." He broke off suddenly as if he had said too much.

"Never would have what, Jim?"

The Captain ignored the question and started forward. "I need to see him."

McCoy shook his head. "The key word here is rest, Jim. No one is going to see him for at least 24 hours. And even then, it depends on his condition."

For a few seconds, the Doctor felt as if he had actually been communicating with the Captain, but at his words, the hazel eyes turned to him, anger lighting their depths.

"You don't understand. I have to see him. I need..."

"Dammit, Jim, haven't you been listening to me?" McCoy searched the face for some sign of the Jim Kirk he knew so well. Sighing, he shook his head. "We're not going to resolve this out here."

He nodded at his office, waiting for Kirk to lead the way. The Captain remained stubbornly where he was. "I see no reason to go to your office. You've got what you wanted. If I'm to do without my First Officer, I need to get back to work."

McCoy narrowed his eyes. "This is part of your physical. And believe me, your lack of cooperation is going down as part of the exam. The longer we argue about this, the longer it will take."

Kirk spun around angrily, stalking through the doors. He muttered as he headed for the chair across from McCoy's desk, "I need a drink."

The Doctor hesitated before going to his locked cabinet. Maybe a shared drink would help. Lord knew, they had done so often enough in the past. Sitting behind his desk, he handed Kirk a glass of the amber liquid and took a small sip of his own. The Captain, on the other hand, downed his in one gulp. He held it out and McCoy refilled it, being careful to conceal the concern he was feeling.

"Your physical doesn't show any significant problems. There are signs of stress, probable cause lack of sleep and proper nutrition. That can be easily remedied. Your psyche reactions show a change, an irritability, shortness of temper, a distrust of people bordering on the edge of paranoia..."

"That's a bunch of bull, McCoy. I'm not paranoid, and your little color flash test can't show that anyway." Kirk snapped belligerently.

McCoy continued, holding the Captain's eyes. "You've refused the deep psychological profile, which would give me a clue how to help you. I warn you, the moment you deviate from command regulations, I will order the psyche profile and remove you from command until I have satisfactory answers. And that includes..." his eyes dipped to the empty brandy glass on the table, "drinking on duty."

Kirk shook his head, leaning forward to refill his glass. "Since when have you had a problem with that? We've done this often enough. If that's reason enough to probe my head, then yours should be examined too."

McCoy lifted his own glass, swirling the brandy around before sipping it. "I didn't come to my own physical with a high level of alcohol in my system. That also goes down in your records and you're well aware of that fact." McCoy leaned back in his chair, folding his arms, waiting for Kirk to say something. After several long moments of silence, he raised an eyebrow. "We can sit here all night if you want, I have all the time in the universe. I believe you on the other hand, are a busy man. So, I suggest you start talking if you want to get out of here before dawn.

Kirk narrowed his eyes. "What is it you want to hear, Doctor? That you and Spock with your varying degrees of insubordination are raising my stress readings to unacceptable levels?"

McCoy shook his head, unable to hide his exasperation. He was almost grateful when the intercom interrupted the moment. It was Chapel reporting another injury in security, a broken arm this time. As he listened to her report, he watched for Kirk's reaction. Nothing. Kirk continued to sip his brandy, taking no interest in the health of his crew.

McCoy cut the connection. "At the rate injuries are piling up on this ship, by the time we get to the Neutral Zone, you may not have a crew to command. That's the third one today."

"You're blaming me for this?"

"I've sent you the report on the sudden increase of careless accidents. And yes, I blame you. I blame you for the extra pressure and the general low morale among the crew."

"Anything else you'd like to pin on me? There's a plague on Shren III and a famine on Allers, while you're at it." Kirk downed the rest of the brandy defiantly. "And you wonder why my stress readings are up?"

McCoy met his look levelly, berating himself for being drawn into this battle of wits. He paused and glanced briefly at his own empty glass. Suddenly angry at himself, he capped the liquor, deciding to lock it away.

In a haze, Kirk watched McCoy go to his cabinet and lock up the brandy, thankful that the Doctor had taken it away. He hated this loss of control, his tongue felt thick, the room was swaying dizzily. He had to concentrate hard to maintain his psychotic facade. Only a little while longer, and he could get back to the safety of his quarters. Spock and he could -- no -- Spock was ill... had lied to him...

McCoy's question seemed to float through several thicknesses of cotton and he felt pain cut into his chest. "What?"

The Doctor had come around his desk and was perched on the corner of it. "I asked you to tell me about Miramanee. You've never told me about the time you spent with her."

Miramanee. In his memory, he watched her run through the woods, the two of them slipping out of their clothes to swim in the cold, mountain fed stream. Laughing together. "She loved to laugh. She would laugh and hold me close and only then would I feel happy."

"What do you mean?" McCoy asked, his blue eyes watchful.

Kirk closed his eyes. That last glass was doing him in. He had not meant to say anything. It hurt too much and again could jeopardize the mission. McCoy must be convinced he was on the edge of a mental breakdown, not simply grieving. Anger at the sealed orders flared again, clearing away some of the cobwebs. He had to get out of here.

He stood, grabbing the back of the chair to steady himself. "This has nothing to do with my physical. If you have nothing else of significance to discuss, I need to get to work."

The blue eyes were implacable. "Jim, we're going to talk. I am past concern for your personal welfare. This has become a necessity for the question of command fitness. Now, I asked you a question. I suggest you sit down and answer it."

Kirk felt his temper flaring out of control. "What the hell does Miramanee have to do with my command fitness? You're out of line, Doctor. I refuse to discuss her."

McCoy cocked his head, unmoved by his anger. "I believe she has everything to do with it. I have a theory, logged officially, that your grief at losing her has caused this aberration of behavior."

There it was again. The image of Miramanee in his arms, crying out in pain. And McCoy's voice falling painfully on his ears, 'I can save her Jim. Just let me...' Kirk slammed his fist down on the desk, sitting abruptly back down. "Stop it!" he growled, more at the painful images than to McCoy.

"Jim," McCoy placed a warm hand on his shoulder and for an instant, Kirk considered leaning into that warmth, allowing his friend to share some of his pain. "I can't begin to imagine how you feel. I didn't know your wife. But I know how I felt being forced to step back and do nothing, letting both her and your son die. I... "

"Son?" Kirk felt new pain wash over him. Miramane had been all he had allowed himself to think about. "You didn't tell me... " He bit the words off.

"No, I didn't. I didn't want to make it any worse for you. I... "

"You did make it worse, then and now," Kirk glared at McCoy, allowing his anger to take over. "I've also been remembering Eve and how she had to die because of you. How your reaction then made the whole sordid deed ten times worse." He stood again, his hands balled into fists.

McCoy's shocked face had paled at his words. The Captain used that, drawing the hurt he had felt from the long ago incident, using it to wound the Doctor. "Each time I've been following my duty to this ship, and each time you've made me suffer for the decision." Kirk strode to the door. "Right now, when I look at your face, all I hear is your accusations outside Miramane's tent that I was committing murder. I was desperately trying to follow regulations and not upset the balance of that unspoiled culture and all you could do was tear me into so many little pieces. So any therapeutic conversations you wish to have will be better practiced on Spock than me, since I can no longer stand the sight of your face."

Kirk stormed through the door, heading rapidly for the corridor. By the time he made it to the lift, his whole body was trembling. Slumping, he let the wall hold him up until the doors slid open. He walked the few feet to his quarters, not sure he would make it before his knees gave way.

Safely inside, he leaned against the wall by the door, slowly sliding to the floor. He knew his reaction was partly from the brandy, but not all of it. He had not wanted to hurt McCoy like that, did not want to leave him wounded. The Doctor for all his psychological poking and prodding was still human and his friend.

"Bones, I'm sorry," he whispered. Not moving, he curled into a miserable ball on the floor, pillowing his head on his arms.



Exactly ten hours later, Spock presented himself to McCoy and requested that he be allowed to go back on duty. McCoy was still not satisfied with his condition.

"I'm not ready to release you yet, Spock. You need more rest. And you don't need the Captain pushing you right now."

The Vulcan refused the rise to the bait. He remained standing in front of McCoy's desk, hands clasped behind his back, face impassive.

McCoy decided to try another tack. "You know, as CMO, I have the authority to order you to answer my questions. I'll make it official if I have to."

The Vulcan still did not respond but did seat himself across from McCoy, arms folded, waiting.

"Well, that's better. Now, Spock... "

"I believe you said this was to be official, Doctor?"

McCoy slammed his fist down on the cluttered surface. "Dammit, Spock, is this whole ship going regulation happy on me? All right, have it your way!" Shoving aside several stacks of tapes, he found the switch and turned on his desk tricorder, beginning the entry, never taking his eyes off of Spock.

"Medical log, stardate 4011.12 regarding the command fitness of Captain James T. Kirk. Chief Medical Officer Leonard McCoy and First Officer Spock reporting." He paused, but when Spock did not seem inclined to comment, he continued the entry. "I have noted the Captain's increasing irritation and general depression over the last several weeks. Mr. Spock, I would like your comments and observations."

Spock hesitated only the slightest fraction of a moment, then began. "As you have stated, the Captain has recently begun acting in a manner not usual to his character. He is easily annoyed and seems generally displeased with the crew and its performance."

"How is this affecting the ship?"

Spock seemed momentarily at a loss for a reply. "I ran a class one check yesterday, per the Captain's orders. It was 88 percent, well within Starfleet norms."

"But not within James Kirk's norms. The Captain demands 98 percent. What was his response to the rating?"

"As with any Captain, he requires a better performance. However, such a demand does not prove any lack of fitness to command on the Captain's part. In fact, quite the opposite."

McCoy glared at Spock. Was he simply going to act as if nothing were wrong? "All right, Commander, let me put it to you another way. Have you seen anything that would indicate a lack of fitness to command?"

"As I indicated, he has been irritable and inapproachable but there has been no dereliction of duty. Since you requested this meeting, Doctor, I assume you have proof of such a charge."

McCoy felt the blood rise to his face as he tried to control what little temper he had left. Talking to this green-blooded computer was proving even more frustrating than usual. He drew a deep breath and plunged in. "I have only my general observations of the Captain's atypical behavior and the crew's responses. This ship is unhappy and, at the moment, the crew's primary concern is the Captain. However, if the general overwork and discipline for insignificant problems continue, the crew will soon become angry and uncooperative. And that, in my opinion, makes this meeting not only necessary but imperative."

Spock steepled his hands in front of his face, not meeting McCoy's eyes. "I quite agree, Doctor. But at present we cannot take any action."

McCoy could frame no answer to this startling statement. He stared at Spock for a long moment, reached for the switch and said, "Log entry complete," flipping off the switch angrily.

"Do you know what's wrong with Jim?" he asked quietly.

The Vulcan visibly tensed. "Have you asked him?"

"I've tried. He won't talk to me. I assume part of the problem is Miramanee." He looked down at his desk and fidgeted with a stylus. He spoke without looking up. "Does he blame me for her death? Is that it?"

"The Captain has not chosen to discuss this with me, however, I cannot accept that he would blame you for what happened."

McCoy sensed another, deeper meaning behind the words but he could tell from Spock's face and demeanor that he would get no more from the Vulcan on this subject.

"All right, Spock. I guess you can go back to getting some more rest."

The Vulcan stood his ground. "I wish to return to my own quarters."

McCoy was suddenly too tired to argue with him. "As you wish. Just try to get some sleep, okay?"

The Vulcan nodded and left. McCoy leaned back in his chair, wiping his face tiredly. Where would it all end? And when?



Kirk sat at the desk in his quarters, wading through a technical report from engineering that Spock would have condensed into an easily digestible page or two. He hoped McCoy would release him soon. If he did not, Kirk would have to take the bull by the horns and "spring" him. Time was running out.

He rubbed his forehead, eyeing the cup of cold coffee on the desk with distaste. He had been up much of the night, not only dealing with the piled up paperwork and reports but also with planning the upcoming mission.

Kirk stood and stretched, working the kinks out of cramped muscles. It was nearly time to report to the bridge. The sudden sound of the door buzzer startled him. Who would be here at this hour? And he knew with a certainty and relief exactly who it was.

"Come."

Spock entered and stood quietly inside the door. Kirk felt ridiculously glad to see him.

"Your presence has been sorely missed, Commander. How are you feeling?"

Spock could not hide his wry smile. "The good Doctor is overly cautious where Vulcans are concerned. I believe he regards me as some kind of prime specimen and does not wish anything to go awry with me."

"I don't want anything to go wrong with you, either. I need you. This ship needs you." The level of his voice rose with the sudden and unexpected anger he was feeling. "Dammit, Spock, don't ever lie to me again, especially about your health. You're too important. To Starfleet... and to me. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir, quite clear."

Kirk turned away and dropped tiredly into the chair behind his desk. "How much longer, Spock?"

"Fourteen point four hours until we cross into the Neutral Zone."

"Not much time and yet it seems like forever." He dropped his head into his hands.

"May I be of assistance with those reports, Captain?"

The quiet words brought Kirk's head up and a smile to his lips. "I think you're supposed to be resting. If McCoy finds out..."

He could not finish the thought so Spock finished it for him. "Perhaps he should find out. He is certainly deserving of our trust."

"Bones would be shocked to hear you say that. No, I can't tell McCoy. Not only because of the orders but he needs to be genuinely convinced of my mental decline. I don't want to put his life in danger which it would be if he knew the truth. Besides," he added with a wry half-grin, "I've already disobeyed orders by telling you." He felt a cold chill wash over him as he realized what he was saying. "Thereby putting your life in danger."

"My life is yours to command, Captain."

Kirk cleared his throat and straightened his shoulders. "You're at the mercy of a maniac, Mr. Spock."

"And the 'maniac', soon to be at the mercy of the Romulans, will take the responsibility if the plan fails, leaving Starfleet in the clear."

Kirk was surprised at the bitterness Spock allowed to show in his voice. "That's the way it has to be, not only for Starfleet but for my crew as well. If I'm caught, I fully expect you to save this ship."

"Leaving you to the Romulans' tortures?"

Kirk shrugged. "All part of the glory of being a starship captain. In any event, it is vital to the safety of the Federation that we 'acquire' this cloaking device." He stood, smiling, desperate to lighten the mood. "On second thought, maybe we should include McCoy. He seems to have information almost before we do."

Spock took up the banter. "Indeed. In addition to his beads and rattles, it would seem he has access to bubbling cauldrons and crystal balls."

"Well, let me get a fresh cup of coffee. We have about half an hour before I have to be on the bridge. I'd like to go over things once more while we still have time."

Spock nodded. "Captain, I must repeat once more that the odds of succeeding in this mission are eight thousand four hundred and two point three against you returning alive to this ship."

"We have our orders," Kirk said, returning to his desk with the steaming coffee. "If you have any better ideas about how to pull it off, I'm more than willing to listen."

"I have had ten hours of enforced rest in McCoy's sickbay in which to contemplate an alternate plan. I see no other option. I am, however, concerned."

"Concern noted, Commander."

"You really should eat something, Jim. I have the definite impression that you have not eaten or slept in quite some time."

"Sleep will have to wait, I'm afraid and the mere thought of food... well, never mind. Let's just forget about that for now and review our orders."

"As you wish, Captain." Spock replied softly.



Sixteen hours after Spock had walked out of his office, McCoy was aboard a Romulan ship, standing in shock over his Captain's body, not quite believing what was happening. He should have relieved Kirk and not let his feelings of friendship get in the way. Maybe Jim would be alive now... no, that way lay madness. He could not deal with that now. He dragged his gaze away from Kirk and looked to Spock for reassurance. All he saw was a stranger. Could Spock really sell out to the Romulans? Could he really have killed Jim with his own hands, accidentally or not, and still be standing there so calmly?

Two burly Romulan centurions came and carelessly dragged Kirk's body from the cell. He moved forward to protest. "Where are you taking him?" One of the guards reached out and brutally slapped him, throwing him up against the wall. Spock watched and did nothing.

McCoy struggled to free himself from the guard's grasp and pleaded with the Romulan Commander. "Please. Let me return with his body to our ship. The crew will need to see him."

The Commander faced him expressionlessly. "Dr. McCoy, you will be questioned. If you are telling the truth, you will be allowed to return to the ship. With your Captain."

For the first time, McCoy saw a faint reaction from Spock.

"Commander, McCoy is a healer. He has no access to the kind of information you seek."

"Nevertheless, he will be questioned. The information I seek is your unspoken truths. Your healer does not have the training to resist our probes."

The Commander signalled with her hand and another guard appeared, disrupter in hand. McCoy shot an angry, frightened look at Spock but the Vulcan ignored him.

As the guard shoved him out the door, he heard Spock's reply. "As you wish, Commander."



Spock quelled his anxiety as he waited for word of McCoy. He resisted the urge to glance out the door of the small bare room in which he had been forced to wait alone. It had been exactly one hour and 39.4 minutes since they had taken the Doctor away. The Romulan Commander had left as well, apparently to oversee the interrogation herself.

Time. It would be running out for all of them soon. But most of all for Kirk. The deep trance state he had induced with the "death grip" would begin to deteriorate soon and Kirk would, in reality, die. He had to make the Commander return the Captain to the ship soon and without arousing her suspicions.

And then there was McCoy. He had no idea how the Romulan interrogation would affect the Doctor. Both he and Kirk had hoped to prevent this very thing. At least Kirk had been correct in not telling McCoy the truth. He could not reveal what he did not know.

Suddenly, the door opened and the Commander entered. She was followed by two guards supporting the sagging body of McCoy between them.

"What have you done to him?" Spock kept his voice carefully neutral while he quelled the urge to wrest McCoy away from the guards.

"Apparently, he knows nothing, just as you stated. He will remember nothing of the interrogation. It will be as if it never happened. I will allow him to return to the Enterprise with your Captain's body. You may escort him to the transporter room."

Spock nodded, moving to take McCoy from the guards. Shivers ran through McCoy's body and there were beads of sweat running down his face.

As Spock guided him to the door, McCoy roused and tried to pull away from him. "Get your filthy hands off me, you traitor!"

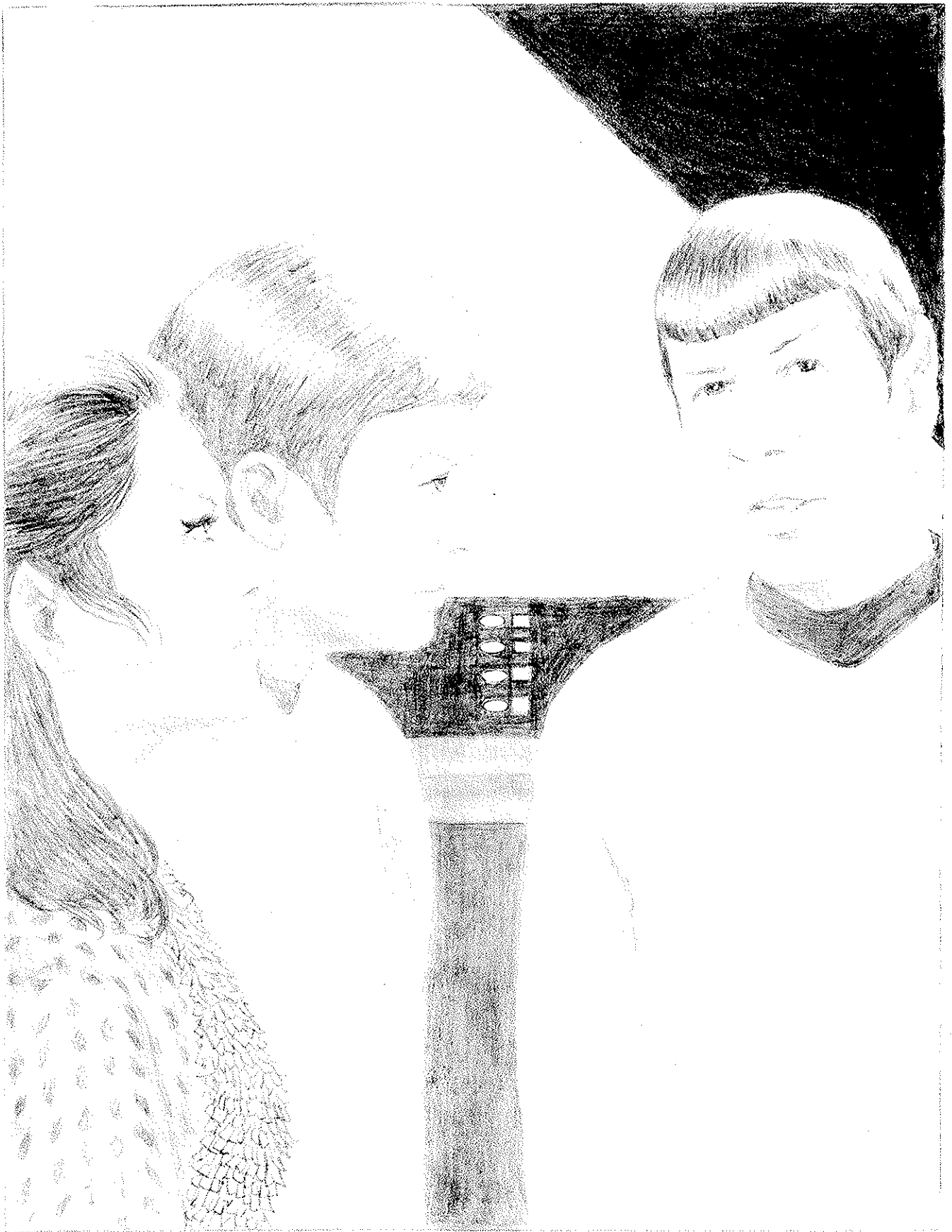
Spock maintained his viselike grip, concentrating furiously. He had to get through to McCoy's mind before he beamed back with the Captain. It would not be easy without the proper contact points and whatever the Romulans had done had involved McCoy's mind. Spock sensed his confusion and mental agony even through the slight contact. And something more. Something so terrifying that McCoy had buried it away from conscious memory. But Spock had no time to deal with it now.

He concentrated on repeating the same words, trying again and again to force McCoy to receive the message he was trying to send. 'McCoy! Jim is alive! You must hear me and help him! Jim is alive!'

Then they were at the transporter room. The door slid aside and on the pad lay Kirk's body. Something twisted inside Spock at the sight, though he knew Kirk was not really dead. A memory, a nightmare, a vision of the future? It was not real and yet it could be, would be, if they did not act soon.

McCoy gasped and pulled free of Spock's grip. He swung around, eyes blazing. "You bastard! Look at what you've done!"

The centurions came forward and forced McCoy up onto the platform. He had only once chance left to get through to the Doctor. He grasped McCoy's arm and stared



intently into the angry blue eyes. Again, he sought to reach the Doctor's mind, beginning to despair that he would get through.

McCoy blinked, his face paling even more. The Romulans wrenched him away from Spock and threw him down on the platform.

Spock held his breath and waited for some sign that McCoy understood. The Doctor knelt beside Kirk's body, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. It was then Spock fully understood the human emotion of relief. He nodded almost imperceptibly. The corners of the Doctor's mouth curled ever so slightly as the transporter was engaged.

Spock drew a calming breath and prepared to return to the Commander. He found he was trembling and was not certain if the cause was the mental strain of trying to reach McCoy, or the fear he had felt when it seemed he would not.

It did not matter now. He forced his attention back to the mission at hand. It was all he could do.



Voices.

He could hear someone talking but could not understand the words. Where was he? What had happened? He could not breath... suffocating...

"Hand me the physiostimulator."

Bones! He was on the Enterprise. He could not open his eyes, could not move. Suddenly, oxygen seemed to flood his lungs and he gasped, drinking in the air like a fine Altarian wine.

He opened his eyes and when he could see clearly, it was McCoy's face hovering over him. There were dark circles and bruises that had not been there before. What had happened?

Reaching a tentative hand, Kirk began to rub the back of his neck.

"That's the Vulcan death grip for you," McCoy's cold voice and flippant remark held some darker meaning to Kirk's ears.

"Death grip? Spock said he would come up with something original but a death grip?"

"But, Doctor, there's no such thing as a Vulcan death grip," Christine said incredulously.

Kirk responded absently, not taking his eyes from McCoy's face. "Yes, but the Romulans don't know that. Sure fooled their doctors."

"You took a big chance they didn't start an autopsy." What would have been the usual cutting remark became an accusation when paired with the anger evident in the blue eyes focused on him.

Kirk looked away. Whatever had happened to McCoy would have to be dealt with later. For now, he had to put the next stage of their plan into action before something happened to Spock that even McCoy could not fix.

Sitting up, he turned to Chapel. "As far as the crew is concerned, I'm still dead."

"Why?" McCoy demanded before Chapel could respond.

Kirk turned back to the Doctor. "That's what this whole masquerade was about, to keep the Enterprise and the Federation off the hook."

"So that if anything went wrong with whatever you're up to, you'd be the only one to blame." McCoy's eyes held Kirk's.

Kirk nodded, forging ahead before anything else was said, and outlined the surgery that would be necessary.

McCoy listened, his eyebrows soaring as high as Spock's. He then sent Christine to gather the necessary supplies.

Kirk noted an odd expression in the Doctor's eyes. McCoy shook his head. "I should have known." Kirk shrugged, then winced. McCoy moved to his side and began to massage his neck with gentle, experienced fingers.

The Captain rolled his neck forward limply. "That helps. Thanks."

"You could use a sonic treatment when you're finished playing espionage agent. That is if you come out of this alive. Just what are your chances, anyway?"

"You don't want to know. Right now, I'm worried about Spock. The Commander has taken more of an interest in him than we anticipated. It could make a difference when he tries to get away."

Chapel reentered the room and, within minutes, McCoy had transformed his Captain into a Romulan. He escorted Kirk down the deserted corridor to the transporter room. Neither spoke in the tense silence and Kirk could spare no energy for McCoy at this point. The mission and retrieving Spock left him no other choice.



McCoy could barely disguise his anxiety as Kirk insisted on beaming aboard the Romulan ship without the proper coordinates. Shaking his head, he closed his eyes against the disappearing sparkles, wondering if he would ever see Kirk again. He jumped, startled, as Scott entered the transporter room and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Dr. McCoy, are ya' all right?"

McCoy rubbed his forehead, as thoughts of great waves of flames flooded his mind and were just as quickly gone. He must be more tired than he thought. "No, I'm not. And I won't be until we have them back. Hopefully, in pieces I can put back together again."

Scott nodded, exchanging a solemn glance with McCoy. "Aye," was all he said. With an arm around the Doctor's shoulder, they left the transporter room together. McCoy could not stop himself from one last backward glance at the empty pad.



James Kirk counted himself lucky. He was back aboard his ship, mission completed successfully, at least in Starfleet's eyes, Spock was safe, all was right with his world. Then why did he feel like hell? It had been several hours since the surgery to "bob" his ears. After filing all the appropriate reports and receiving all the "atta boys" Admirals were prone to throw around like so much space debris, he found himself on Deck Five. He had not seen McCoy since he had left sickbay. In fact, no one had, and that was what concerned the Captain.

He had considered calling McCoy but something told him his call would be refused. Showing up unannounced probably was not a much better solution but he was uneasy and unsure of just how things stood between them. McCoy had been "all business" in sickbay and he had not had time to really assess the situation until the last few minutes. His hand hesitated at the signal. This was crazy. The Captain afraid of his CMO? Defiantly, he punched the button. The look on McCoy's face when the door opened was not reassuring and the blue eyes sparkled like frozen sapphires.

"Can we talk, Bones?" he asked quietly.

"About what?" came the clipped response.

"About whatever it is that's bothering you."

"It's a little late for that, isn't it?"

Kirk sighed. This was not going to be easy. "Can I come in?"

McCoy stepped back to allow him to enter, then walked to the other side of the room as if to get as far away from him as the tight quarters would allow. Turning, he stood, arms folded, stiff and silent.

Kirk decided two could play that game. Dropping tiredly into a chair, he folded his arms and stared back, saying nothing.

McCoy could finally stand the silence no longer. "Why didn't you tell me what was going on?"

"I had sealed orders. No one was to know but me."

"But you told Spock." The words were nearly a whisper. "Didn't you trust me, Jim?"

Kirk looked up, surprised. "Trust you? Of course, I trust you. With my life, if need be, and on more than one occasion."

"But not with details of a mission that could have cost you that life."

Kirk stood, stunned by the deep hurt in McCoy's voice.

"Bones, we wanted to protect you. I thought the less you knew, the less chance of you getting hurt."

McCoy turned his back.

Kirk walked toward him, feeling somehow that he needed to touch McCoy, make physical contact with those rigid shoulders. He stopped just short of the Doctor. As he watched, fine tremors quivered along the Doctor's spine and were just as quickly stopped.

"Bones, you know I would never intentionally do anything to hurt you."

Silence. He did reach out then, and forced McCoy to turn around. The Doctor's face was chalk white and he was trembling again. His eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"Bones?"

"I know the real reason, Jim. I couldn't save Miramanee and you hate me for it."

Kirk was shocked by the words. Hate McCoy? Of course, he didn't hate him. And there had to be some reason beyond his not taking McCoy into his confidence to cause such a severe reaction. He searched his mind for the right words to reach McCoy, hesitating, letting the moments of silence stretch between them. And in those seconds, he lost McCoy. The Doctor pulled free of his grasp and turned away.

"Get out, Jim. Leave me alone," he said tiredly, trembling even harder.

"Bones... "

McCoy turned back, his face contorted with anger and pain. "Just leave. Now!"

"All right. But this conversation is not over. Not by a long shot, Doctor."

McCoy watched the door slide shut, watched probably the only person on the whole damn ship who could help him and he had driven him away.

The Doctor threw himself on his bunk, arms crossed over his eyes, trying to shut out what his mind was seeing. But it was no use, the flames were growing, feeding on his soul, and soon there would be nothing left but ashes. The flames were burning away the wall he had built around the memory of what the Romulans had done to him. The invasion of his mind, his very being laid open to their ridicule and scorn. They had torn his mind to shreds, and not finding what they sought, had gone away, leaving it to smolder under the layer of forgetfulness they had implanted.

Now the flames leaped higher, growing stronger, and he could not push them away. He knew they would consume him, leaving only a shell. The being who had been Leonard McCoy would cease to exist and he could do nothing to stop it. What had been only fear now became pain, real, devastating in its intensity. The fire spread to consume not only his mind but his body as well. The scream of agony grew in his throat until he could contain it no longer. With some last bit of sanity, he reached out to activate the emergency signal above his bunk. He did not want to die alone.



James Kirk was as angry as he could remember being in a very long time. As he strode the corridor to the cabin where the Romulan Commander was being held, the only

image in his mind was McCoy, screaming in an agony even the strongest medications could not control, strapped to a bed in his own sickbay.

He could not communicate except in broken phrases, cries for help from friends he did not even know were there. Whatever was wrong, there was only one person on board his ship who could help and he intended to secure that help, whatever it took.

Spock waited outside the door with a Security detail. He met Kirk a short distance away from the entrance.

"How is the Doctor?"

Kirk shook his head. "Critical. M'Benga says he won't last another hour at the rate he's deteriorating. There's been no response to anything they've tried. Whatever the Romulans did to him aboard that ship has just about destroyed him." Kirk turned to stare at the closed cabin door. "Do you think she'll help?"

Spock sighed slightly, shaking his head. "I would not count on it, Captain. It was not my impression of the Commander that anything resembling compassion or kindness was a part of her persona."

Pulling his tunic straight, Kirk marched toward the door, hoping he would be able to prove Spock wrong in this instance.

The door slid aside to find the Commander seated and Kirk had the impression of royalty receiving the peasants. He bowed slightly. "Commander? I hope you are comfortable here?"

She did not answer but raised one eyebrow in a gesture so like Spock that Kirk almost laughed. "I am certain, Captain, that my comfort or lack of it, is of little or no importance to you. You want something. Am I to be tortured or will you settle for merely drugging me?"

Kirk settled himself on a corner of the desk. "Commander, your pose of righteous indignation does not become you. We are all military here, we all know the risks involved when dealing with the enemy. However, unlike the Romulans, Starfleet does not believe in torturing anyone, for any reason. In point of fact, I have come here to ask your help."

The proud Romulan's head came up and the eyes narrowed at his statement. "Why would I help you, even if I could?"

"Subcommander Tal. I believe you consider him a friend, do you not?"

She sneered. "Romulan commanders do not have friends, Captain. It would be considered a weakness."

"Well, that's where we differ, madam. I consider my friends to be my greatest strength. Getting back to Tal, if you could do something to save his life, would you do it?"

She stood then and half lunged at him. "Are you threatening him? What have you done with him?"

Spock moved to place himself between her and Kirk. She stopped within inches of him, hands claw-like, poised at his face.

"Stop!" Kirk ordered. The Commander dropped her hands as if burned. "I would not touch him, Captain. I would not dirty my hands."

"Tal is still aboard your ship and, to the best of our knowledge, has not been harmed, Commander," Spock intoned. She ignored him as if he had not spoken.

"But Doctor McCoy has." Kirk had trouble keeping the anger from his voice. He had come to ask her help. It would not do to alienate her. "We must know what was done to him aboard your ship. Whatever our quarrel, Dr. McCoy was an innocent bystander. He is not a military man, he is a healer."

She turned her back to him. "There is no such thing as an innocent bystander, Captain. We all make choices in life and we must answer for those choices." The rage in her voice deepened. "What are your unspoken truths, Captain Kirk?"

"I don't understand."

"Your First Officer came aboard my ship with his own agenda, his own motives for what he did. What are yours and what will you give to accomplish them?"

Kirk exchanged glances with Spock. "We are two days from the Neutral Zone. If you help us save McCoy's life, I will release you there. You can return to your people or go wherever the hell you want to go."

She turned and looked at him calculatingly. "Done."



The return trip to sickbay, accompanied by Spock, was accomplished at almost a dead run. The Commander had given them instructions for preparing a drug that would counteract the effects of the interrogation device they had used on McCoy.

M'Benga was doubtful but they had no choice. McCoy's condition was deteriorating by the moment and nothing else they had attempted had helped stop the downward slide toward death.



Once the drug was administered, Kirk planted himself in a chair by the bed, refusing to rest, refusing to allow anyone to relieve him. Spock stood in the shadows of the room, watching Kirk fight for McCoy's life with every fiber of strength he could give. He talked to McCoy, holding his hand, leaning forward toward the still figure on the bed as if he could infuse McCoy with his own strong will to live.

The hours dragged on with no change. "Don't let the bastards win, Bones," he heard Kirk whisper. "Don't let them win."

Ship's dawn found Kirk asleep in the chair on one side of the bed and Spock standing watch at the foot of the bed. M'Benga came to stand beside him, studying the panel above McCoy's head for a few silent moments. "Do you see what I see?" he whispered to the Vulcan. "There's been some improvement!"

"I have watched the changes for the past 36.5 minutes. The Doctor is indeed returning to us."

McCoy's eyes fluttered open a few minutes later and, in his semiconscious state, he pulled his hand from Kirk's grasp. Kirk reacted immediately, waking and looking to M'Benga for a report.

"I think he's going to make it, Captain."

Spock felt the warmth of Kirk's smile at the news and allowed his own face to reveal his own relief and gratitude at the turn of events.

McCoy licked dry lips and attempted to speak. "What... happened?"

"The Captain was able to persuade the Romulan Commander to provide a drug to counteract the effects of the device they used on you aboard their ship," Spock responded gently.

M'Benga, busy checking vital signs and panels, looked at McCoy. "How do you feel, Leonard?"

McCoy lay very still for several moments, as if taking an internal inventory. "Better. The... flames... are gone. I felt... as if my... mind... were being consumed by flames. Couldn't stop them. Gone now." With that, his eyes drifted closed.

M'Benga touched Kirk's shoulder. "Captain, he will need several hours rest. And he's not the only one. Go get some sleep. I'll call you if there is any change."

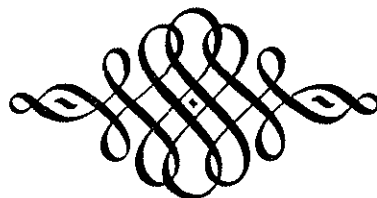
Kirk nodded and Spock followed him from the room. As they walked toward the lift, Kirk suddenly stopped, turning to face Spock.

"I had a lot of time to think these past hours, Spock. The Commander was right in some ways. We all have our unspoken truths and I have faced some of mine. I have been blaming McCoy for Miramanee's death and he knew it even if I didn't. But it was because I could not accept my own culpability. I understand that now and accept that we all did everything possible. I wish that things could have been different but they aren't and all the blaming in the universe won't change a moment of time. Keeping him in the dark was my way of punishing him, I guess. Do you think he'll forgive me?"

"Perhaps if you tell him what you have just told me... "

Kirk smiled gently. "Yeah, good idea. At least it's a place to start." His face grew serious once more. "The Commander was wrong about the other thing she said, Spock. There are innocents abroad. Miramanee was one, and McCoy is another."

"Indeed, Captain. Indeed."



The Silent Cry

By: Kay Stagg

As Spock emerged from the shuttlebay, he found both Kirk and Doctor McCoy waiting for him. McCoy was jubilant, his relief at Spock's safe return reflected in the only way he knew how. "You got as much information as possible?" he asked, eagerly.

"Of course," Spock replied, smoothly.

"Don't get smug with me, Spock," McCoy retorted quickly. "As I said before, you botched that acetylcholine test."

"Agreed. However, as I rightly pointed out to you, Doctor, you would not even have survived the initial penetration into the amoeba. The results of my tests will prove that. As you are aware, I very nearly did not return myself."

"Why you conceited, pointed-eared V... "

"Bones!" Kirk's tone was firm, for once not willing to put up with their usual running verbal banter. He looked steadily at McCoy as if daring him to say anything else on the subject.

McCoy had the grace to look slightly embarrassed. He turned to Spock. "Yeah, all right, but that reminds me, Spock. I did wish you luck. I would have thought your Vulcan ears would have heard me even if it was through the walls of the shuttlebay."

"Indeed! I did not, but I had many important matters to consider."

"In point of fact you weren't listening," McCoy retorted, realizing that once Spock had stepped through the doors, his mind would have been on the task at hand.

Spock raised an eyebrow.

"Bones, that is enough!" Kirk interrupted. He looked at Spock. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Captain and grateful to be back on the Enterprise."

"We're all glad to have you back."

"Well, I'll see you both later," McCoy said. "I suggest you go to bed, Jim. With all those chemicals in your blood stream, it is a wonder you made it this far." Kirk sighed. "Don't wait too long," McCoy added, determined to get in the last word as he ambled off down the corridor towards the lift.

Kirk turned back to the Vulcan, waiting patiently beside him. "You don't have to hurry with that report, Spock. It can wait till the morning. I doubt if I could take much in at the moment." He gazed intently at the Vulcan. "You really are all right?" he asked again.

Spock looked into the expressive eyes. Eyes filled with affection and he felt the warmth of the smile that went with it. The tension that McCoy always managed to rouse in him dissolved.

"I am fine, Jim. The report will be on your desk in the morning," he confirmed. "Are you going to have something to eat now?"

"Eat?" Kirk queried. "No thanks, not right now. I'm going to bed to sleep... and sleep..." His voice trailed off. "I'll see you tomorrow, Spock. I just wanted to make sure you were all right."

"Good night, Jim."

"Good night, Spock."

Sleep well, Spock thought as he watched Kirk walk wearily in the same direction as McCoy.



Twenty-five minutes later, Spock was in his quarters. He had gone to the dining area and eaten a substantial meal. He placed the pile of tapes on his desk and considered making his report immediately. He had, after all, promised the Captain it would be on his desk in the morning. However, it occurred to him that if he completed the report now, Kirk would have to read it first thing. Although that spoke of efficiency, he was more concerned with the weariness that surrounded the Captain. Knowing Kirk would act on the report the minute he received it, Spock decided to leave it until the following day. After all, the amoeba was destroyed and, therefore, there was no immediate urgency.

Instead, he moved into his sleeping area, removed his meditation robe from the drawer and laid it out on the bed. He undressed slowly, each item of clothing either being placed in the recycling chute or folded neatly and laid on his chair; he placed his boots beside his bed.

Once he had showered, he donned the robe, ready for meditation. Sitting cross-legged on his bed, his fingertips barely touching, he allowed his mind and body to relax. A sudden muffled thump came from the adjoining quarters and it brought him instantly alert. He uncrossed his legs and stood up, waiting to see whether the sound would be repeated.

He remained totally still and listened. The muffled sound came again. He could not decide whether it was a voice or perhaps just movement. He checked the chronometer and thought again. Surely the Captain would be asleep by now. Since he could not intrude on someone else's privacy, he lay down on his bed. But he dismissed the idea of meditation.

The muffled sound had disturbed him more than he cared to admit. Kirk had appeared very vulnerable this evening. On reflection it seemed that Kirk's eyes had been overbright; that his relief at Spock's return could not be put into words. In fact considering their conversation, Kirk had said very little... it had been McCoy as usual who had plenty to say.

'I would have thought your Vulcan ears would have heard me even if it was through the walls of the shuttlebay,' McCoy had said, obviously hoping that he had heard the words he had found so hard to say. It was strange how Humans found it easier to say what they felt when the person at which it was directed was not around.

He inspected the wall separating his quarters from Kirk's. Just supposing Kirk did need him. Would he call for help? Logically, no... he would use the intercom, but there still remained a nagging doubt. He stood up again, divided between his concern for his Captain and his friend and the desire to respect Kirk's privacy. Friendship finally won through, although as he began to put a clean uniform back on again, he wondered what kind of excuse he could give if nothing was wrong.

He silently trod the few steps between their quarters and pressed the buzzer, feeling in the circumstances that an announced entrance would be better, but there was no reply. Perhaps Kirk was asleep but, if so, what had caused that muffled sound?

Raising an eyebrow at his next step, he touched the door and it slid open. Kirk's quarters were in semi-darkness, but he stepped quietly in. From the desk he could see that the bed was empty although Kirk's green tunic was slung carelessly on it. He palmed the light switch and turned the light up slightly, his glance taking in the empty sleeping area... he looked toward the bathroom.

"Captain!" he called out, moving towards the door. "Jim!"

A slight movement behind him made him whirl around to find Kirk, only half dressed, slumped on the floor beside the bed. He was trembling violently.

"Jim!"

Kirk's eyes were unfocused, perspiration beading his forehead and running in rivulets down his chest. Spock gazed at him, appalled, and then leapt across the bed and banged his hand down hard on the intercom. "McCoy! Medical emergency. Captain's quarters."

He went back to Kirk and knelt down beside him. Kirk did not seem to know him and that frightened him more than he was ever prepared to admit. He heard, with relief, McCoy come through the door and he moved out of the way, sitting down heavily on the bed.

"Jim," McCoy said gently, as he knelt down beside him. He felt his pulse and then ran the mediscanner over him. "Damn!" he muttered.

"What is it?" Spock asked, his tone showing his alarm.

"Those damned chemicals I pumped into him. I warned him he was taking too many... one more, that's what he kept saying, just keep me going... just one more and my God, now look at him."

"What can you do?"

McCoy shrugged. "There's nothing I can give him. He just has to get through this somehow. More sedatives will just compound the problem. I think we should try and get him back to bed." He turned back to Kirk. "C'mon, Jim," he coaxed gently. "You can't sleep on the floor all night."

They managed to get him to his feet, but then he pulled violently away from them, fighting off McCoy's restraining hands, close to hysteria.

"Spock," McCoy shouted. "The door... "

Spock quickly depressed the lock and Kirk cannoned into the door and fell to the floor, his body shaking violently. He curled up into a tight ball and just lay there moaning softly.

"I'll have to get him to sickbay. We may have to put him in restraints until the worst of this passes."

"No!" Spock's voice was deadly quiet, but firm.

"He'll hurt himself even more if he carries on like this. We have to protect him from himself."

"He will not hurt himself because I will not let him. You are not going to put him in restraints. He is distressed enough," Spock replied as he knelt once more beside Kirk. "Leave us, McCoy. If you can do nothing to help him, then just leave."

"Now look Spock. I know you're concerned. You have to trust me."

Spock looked up at him and the blackness in his eyes stopped McCoy dead in his tracks. He looked at Kirk and then at the determination on Spock's face. He had already proven he could not physically restrain Kirk without help and the thought of trying to get past Spock's strength made him pause.

"All right, Spock, it's in your hands. But if it gets too bad, call me."

Spock ignored him and McCoy left, even though part of him told him he should stay. Yet seeing the tender expression on Spock's face as he bent over Kirk, he knew he could not be in better hands. Although he had said he would put Kirk in restraints in sickbay, he had not relished the idea. If it had been any other crewman in this condition, he would not have hesitated but if anyone could handle Kirk and the night to come, Spock could.

Once McCoy had gone, Spock eased Kirk into his arms and gently held him, speaking reassuringly all the time.

Kirk's trembling finally subsided slightly and he looked up into Spock's face. "S-S-Spock..." He seemed unable to credit his own sight. "...Oh, God," he moaned as the incessant trembling increased.

"Easy, Jim. Just keep still."

"I-I-I guess M-M-McCoy was right..." Kirk whispered, "those damned stimulants... s-s-said I'd b-b-b-low apart..."

"How long have you been like this?"

"S-S-Seems like... h-h-hours..."

"Perhaps if you get into bed?" Spock suggested. "You are cold."

But movement just seemed to make the trembling worse and in the end Spock decided to leave Kirk where he was. He stripped the bed and placed its pillow under Kirk's head and covered him with the coverlet.

"Y-Y-You d-d-d-don't have... t-t-to stay..." Kirk stammered.

Spock ignored him and pushed the lock of sweaty damp hair off his forehead.

"M-M-Must look a... m-m-mess."

"I have seen you looking better," Spock replied.

"... mmm glad you're here," Kirk murmured. He tried to move into a more comfortable position but the trembling increased again until he was shaking violently. "Oh, god... S-S-Spock... help m-m-m-me..." He clutched at Spock's hands. His mouth was dry and a rushing noise thundered continually in his ears. He was practically moaning in despair.

Spock clasped his arms tightly around the quivering Human and he remained like that all through the night -- reassuring him when the trembling was out of control; holding him and supporting him, listening and talking until at last, during the early hours of the morning, Kirk fell into an exhausted sleep.

Much to Spock's annoyance, Kirk's alarm went off at 0615 and Kirk was instantly awake. He looked up at Spock, whose arms were still clasped gently around him, and then at the disarray surrounding them.

"Are you all right now, Captain?" Spock released his hold.

Kirk struggled to sit up and yawned. "Yes, I am... now. Just tired." He looked sheepishly at Spock. "I suppose it would be trite to say I'm sorry."

Spock tilted his head to one side.

"... but not to say thank you," Kirk added.

"That is not necessary, Jim."

Kirk got to his feet and sat down heavily on the end of the bed. He looked earnestly up at Spock. "It is necessary... for me. I needed help last night and you were there." You're always there when I need you, he thought to himself. "How did you know?"

Spock reached out and touched Kirk's temple gently. "Your cry for help was not as silent as you think, Jim."

Gratitude filled Kirk's eyes but before he could speak, the silence was broken by the irritating sound of his buzzer.

He smiled wryly at Spock. "Who is it?" he called out.

"It's me, Jim," McCoy replied as he walked in. He looked at Kirk and then at Spock, ignoring the state of the room. "You okay, Jim?" he asked.

"Yes, I am... now."

He waited patiently while McCoy ran the mediscanner over him. "Well, at least those chemicals seem to be dispersing. Don't you ever ask me to give you so much again."

"Bones," Kirk said seriously. "If we hadn't managed to destroy that amoeba, it wouldn't have mattered... to any of us."

"Maybe... but it matters to us now. I was all for putting you in restraints in sickbay last night but Spock wouldn't allow it."

"Another reason to thank you. It was bad enough without being tied down as well. Your judgment was right on the mark," and his eyes reflected gratitude for the warm friendly arms and comforting voice rather than the cold impersonal feel of sickbay.

Kirk yawned. "Well, I think I'll have a shower and get on with my report on that amoeba. Did you get yours done, Spock?" he asked.

Spock looked guilty. "I did not have the time."

Kirk smiled in understanding. "I see. Well, let me have it later."

"Don't you think it would be better if you went to bed, Jim?" McCoy asked. "Now that the danger has passed, you are not needed on the bridge. Spock can take command for a few hours." He looked toward the Vulcan seeking agreement, but Kirk stalled him.

"I can have all the sleep I need on shore leave, but right now I have work to do."

"Hmph! Well are you going to have any breakfast?"

Kirk's face lit up at the thought. He had not realized until then just how hungry he was. He could not remember the last time he had eaten. "Give me ten minutes for a shower and change of clothes," and he headed in to his bathroom.

McCoy exchanged glances with Spock and turned and left Kirk's quarters, closely followed by the Vulcan. "What is it, Spock?" he asked.

"How is the Captain?" Spock asked, his voice neutral, hoping to conceal his inner concern for his commanding officer.

However, in that respect, it was too late. McCoy was not likely to forget the look of tenderness on the Vulcan's face as he had bent over Kirk's body the night before. "He's fine, Spock, so stop worrying. There are a few trace elements of chemicals in his blood this morning but not more than anyone else. I'll pull him into sickbay later and give him a thorough medical but I doubt if anything will show up." He looked steadily at Spock for a moment. "You have to understand just how much of that stuff he had pumped into him."

"In that case, as you are the doctor, you should have used your medical judgment."

"A bit difficult when a Commanding Officer insists on something. And anyway, it wasn't only that and you know it. It was the emotional pressure he was under too. He was tired and in need of R&R before all of this, plus the worry of commanding this ship and keeping his crew alive... not to mention he believed he was sending you to certain death. There is no getting away from the fact that your chances of survival were practically nil. Any victory he achieved would have been nothing if you had not come through. Taking stimulants is one way of getting through bad times and if he asks and it helps, then I will give them to him."

He eyed Spock's closed expression for a moment and then continued. Somehow he had to make Spock understand. "I could have stayed with him last night, Spock, but it wasn't me he needed. He needed the living proof you were alive... that was the only reason he came down to the shuttlebay with me last night. You must have realized that." McCoy's words softened slightly. "I've told you, he is fine now." He then suddenly remembered something he had been meaning to ask Spock since the night before. "How did you know Jim was reacting so badly to those chemicals? Did he ask you for your help?" Even as he asked, he could not help but wonder why Jim had not come to him.

"He did not ask for help," Spock replied, reading McCoy just as easily. "I heard him."

"I see," McCoy murmured, more than puzzled. "You heard him... through two walls and a bathroom." He waited for Spock to make some comment but at that moment Kirk came out of his quarters.

"Gentlemen?" he said quietly, looking from one to the other. "Is anything wrong?"

They both turned and looked at their Captain. Although there were dark marks under his eyes from a nearly sleepless night, he nevertheless looked his normal self. They exchanged glances.

"No, Captain, everything is fine," they said in unison, for once in agreement.

Kirk looked mildly surprised at their reply but kept his thoughts to himself. Instead, he replied, "Good, let's go and have some breakfast," and he gently linked his hands through their arms and propelled them towards the lift.



NEC-1701-A

I knew him when he was but a callow youth,
Impetuous as only the young can be.
From the first instant he saw me I filled his life
And he both loved and despised me because of it.
He tried more than once to leave,
But my song would draw him back,
Without me he was not complete.
Others knew this truth,
The one who loved him as he loved me,
Who stood within my walls and stated that
To command a starship was his first, best destiny.
And the other who told him, "Get back your ship.
Get it back before you really do grow old."
So he did as they asked,
And once again followed my song,
But there was to be no more joy.
One gave his life so we could live,
And now he asks the same of me.
I feel the anguish of his love
As he gives the order to destruct.
Though I die, I shall always remain a part of him.
Remember, before you ever were,
He was a part of me.

By: Ginna LaChoir

Another Private Little War

By: Sandy Zier

Art by: Leah Shaw

Spock was putting the finishing touches on his quarters. His gaze rested on his firepot, which stood in the corner. He thought about past events and how intuitive the Captain had been in removing it from the old ship before hijacking it to go to Genesis. He thought about what had transpired since. The probe... finding the whales... Sybok. He carried Sybok's katra until such time as he could return to Vulcan. That could wait. Sybok's katra was deep within the recesses of his mind, well protected.

He knew the crew was busy fine-tuning the Enterprise -- something that had been interrupted when she had been called into action prematurely to handle the hostage situation on Nimbus 3. Starfleet had graciously ordered them on a routine starmapping mission in the Zebulon system to allow time for necessary repairs and to complete the overhaul that had been in progress. Luckily, to Mr. Scott's relief, this time they had more than just a "skeleton crew."

Surveying his quarters, Spock decided everything was in order. The temperature was at a comfortable level and he was about to go to the science lab when there was a signal for entrance. "Come in." Kirk entered, looking happy and relaxed. "Captain? I presume you have settled into your quarters?"

"As well as I'll ever be. It'll take some time to get it comfortable and broken in. A lot of my personal possessions that were on Earth were damaged or destroyed by the probe, and I haven't had the time to try to replace them." Kirk noticed a familiar setup in one area of Spock's quarters. "I see you have the chess game unpacked."

"Yes. And I am looking forward to playing you again."

"I've missed our games... but now that we're together again, our lives can get back to normal." Kirk hesitated. "Now, however, I'm starved. Care to join me for some dinner? I thought we could stop by sickbay and ask Bones to join us."

Spock thought about his earlier plans to go to the science lab and check out the progress there. That could wait and he wanted to have a meal with his friends. "I will join you. But do not forget, Dr. McCoy said once we returned from shore leave, you would have to watch what you eat."

Kirk grimaced. "Yeah -- he loves it too. With that skinny body of his, he doesn't know what it's like to have to watch what he eats." Chuckling, Kirk added, "What I would

give to be able to eat just a small portion of the chocolate that man eats... " Looking at his stomach and giving it a pat, he shook his head. "Oh well, let's go. Maybe he'll be nice tonight and let me indulge myself."

A tiny smile appeared on Spock's face. "Possibly. However, I would not count on it."

S

Leonard McCoy sat at his desk, staring at the disarray around him. "I don't believe that people can't follow simple directions. All I wanted was the supplies to be put away," he said to no one in particular as he moved things around on his desk. Several nurses and other crewmembers were trying to make some sense out of the piles of supplies that had been left in sickbay. He saw Christine Chapel out of the corner of his eye. "Christine, could you come in here a minute, please?"

Christine Chapel made her way through the maze of supplies and stood at the doorway of McCoy's office. "Yes, Doctor?"

"Now, don't be so formal. We've worked together much too long for that. Have a seat." McCoy motioned to the only chair not occupied by medical supplies. "I hear you're doing a research project on regeneration of neural synapses in the cortex of the brain after damage due to oxygen loss. How far did you get before you were pulled away to join us on the Enterprise?" The Chief Medical Officer leaned back in his chair.

"Well, first, let me say I wasn't pulled away, as you well know -- I requested this assignment." Chapel noted a grin on her mentor's face. "As far as my research, I'm hoping to complete as much of it as I can with the facilities on the Enterprise. Mr. Spock is assisting me in setting up in one of the science labs and, as you so often have said, there isn't much a starship can't do that a starbase can." She hesitated, glancing guiltily at the nurses who were hard at work.

McCoy noticed Chapel's attention to the work going on. His hand waved toward the door. "If you must, you can get back to work in a few minutes. However, I'd really like to know where your research stands," the Doctor encouraged.

Christine turned back to face her longtime friend. "Well, nerve regeneration was accomplished a long time ago, as you well know. However, regeneration of the neural synapses in the brain have remained an enigma to the medical profession. If we can just figure out a way to allow these synapses to re-establish after oxygen debt, we may then be able to work to re-establish them after trauma or other physical destruction."

"That's quite a task. If we can ever find a way to reverse what is now termed 'irreversible brain damage,' the number of lives that would be returned to normal would be phenomenal."

"I know. That's why I'm really excited about all this. We can regenerate the tissue, the nerves -- even the nerve cells -- but for some reason we still can't get the nerves from the body to communicate with the brain after their connection has been destroyed, even when the physical connection has been repaired." Chapel stood up when she heard the sound of something falling. She looked at McCoy and shrugged her shoulders. "If I don't get back there, we may not have any supplies to worry about."

McCoy laughed. "Okay, Chris, I'll let you go in a minute. Too bad we can't duplicate what I was able to learn temporarily with the 'teacher' when I was able to replace Spock's brain when it was removed. But, since that isn't possible, what approaches have you taken so far?" McCoy asked, genuinely interested.

"Well, I've approached it from the ion concentrations, the thicknesses of cell membranes..."

Christine was interrupted by a knock on the door. Kirk entered, followed by his First Officer, and surveyed the maze of supplies. "What are you two doing in here relaxing when there's work to be done?" he asked with a big grin on his face.

McCoy replied with mock indignation. "We are working! We were discussing a very serious medical research project on officers who tend to eat too much on shore leave... we're looking for volunteers..."

"Uh, okay, okay, forget it," Kirk laughed. "Spock and I are going to grab something to eat, do you two want to join us?"

McCoy glanced around at the disorganization around him. "Sure, I have nothing better to do. How about you, Chris?" The Doctor looked at Chapel.

"No, I think I do have things to do," motioning to the piles of supplies. "I'm afraid we couldn't even handle a minor abrasion at this point -- I think the bandages are somewhere in the Botany lab. But thanks anyway." Christine rose to leave.

"I want to continue our discussion on your research -- and if there's anyway I can help, you know my door's always open." Dr. Chapel nodded and, picking up a box of supplies from one of the chairs, headed out of the room. McCoy turned to his two friends and got to his feet. "Okay, let's go. By the way, Jim. I've programmed the food dispenser for your new diet -- so don't try anything! -- and Spock, it wouldn't hurt you to cut down a little as well." The Doctor sent a quick look in Kirk's direction.

Kirk glanced at Spock and grinned, "Misery loves company, you know. Besides, as I said... we're getting back to normal." The three men left sickbay and headed towards the officers' dining room.

S

After dinner, Spock left for the science lab, as Kirk and McCoy headed toward the officers' quarters. "Jim, care to join me in a drink?"

"Sure, Bones, if you think it's on my diet." Kirk grinned.

"I think you could afford one, small drink," McCoy returned the grin. "Besides, I hate to drink alone."

The two men entered the Doctor's cabin, and Kirk was somewhat surprised to see that McCoy had barely unpacked. "I thought you'd be more moved in by now."

McCoy pulled a bottle out and fixed Kirk and himself a drink. "Oh, I just haven't had time. Sickbay is a disaster area so I made that my primary project." The Doctor shook his head. "There's still an awful lot of work to do."

"I see. Well, hopefully once you get sickbay back in order -- you can make yourself feel at home." Kirk accepted the drink McCoy offered and sat down. He wondered how much time the Doctor had actually spent in his quarters since their return from shore leave. A wrinkled bedspread was the only indication that the cabin was even being occupied.

McCoy sat down behind his desk. "Well, maybe. It's going to take a lot of work to get sickbay in shape. Christine has been doing a great job but I know she wants to get back to her research."

"What kind of research is she working on?" Kirk asked.

"Well," the Doctor started. "It's a bit complicated. But to put it in a nutshell, she's working on ways to reverse what is now termed 'irreversible brain damage.' She's really excited about her work." A grin crept across McCoy's face. "We're fortunate to have her here."

"I'll have to stop in and wish her luck," Kirk agreed. "We want to keep her happy."

McCoy stifled a yawn. "Can I freshen your drink?"

Noticing that the Doctor was tired, Kirk held up his hand, "No, I think you should get some sleep. Maybe I can talk Spock into a game of chess." As Kirk stood, he drained his glass. "Good night, Bones. Thanks for the drink."

"Good night, Jim."

After Kirk left, McCoy washed the glasses and put them away. He then surveyed the room. Boxes of his personal belongings were stacked up along the walls. He pulled one of the boxes down and set it on his bed. "Guess I should do something about these," he said as he opened the box. He sat down on the bed and pulled out a few items, but returned them to the box. "I'm just not in the mood for this right now." He placed the box on the floor and dressed for bed. He turned down the lights and settled in for what he hoped would be a good night's sleep.

But sleep was hard in coming. It was close to an hour before he settled into a fitful sleep, and that's when the nightmare began.

It was a funeral. His father's funeral. But McCoy was the only person there. He walked into a room that was a crematorium. The memorial service was over and his father was to be cremated. The coffin holding the shell that had once been his father was being carried into the fires of the crematorium. McCoy knew he should leave, but he stood and stared as flames engulfed the coffin. Suddenly, there was a bright flash of light and a voice... no a scream. "WHY DID YOU KILL ME, LEONARD?"

McCoy awoke in a cold sweat. Will these nightmares never stop? Knowing it would be another sleepless night, he decided to go to the labs and make sure everything was set up for Christine. These sleepless and lonely nights were getting to him and there was no relief in sight.

S

McCoy entered the briefing room the next morning to find Kirk and Spock already there. "What is this about new orders?" He pulled back a chair and settled into it.

Kirk glanced at the official orders on the table. "We have been ordered to the planet Neural. It seems from the reports I received that the Hill People and the Villagers want to return to their peaceful ways. However, they are unable to accomplish this on their own because the Klingons keep interfering." The Captain looked down at the report. "It seems that both groups have decided they will consider joining the Federation if we act as arbitrator between the two groups."

McCoy cringed at the thought of a possible confrontation with the Klingons. "But Jim, Scotty says the ship isn't ready. If we happen to run into the Klingons... and we're bound to... remember, they don't like you."

"It seems there are already two Federation ships at Neural handling the Klingon situation," the Captain explained. "However, Tyree has specifically requested that the Enterprise act as the arbitrator."

"Still, we should make sure the ship is ready, should the need arise," Spock interjected.

"I know. I've already asked Mr. Scott to step up the work in engineering." Kirk leaned back and turned to the Doctor. "Bones, we'll need sickbay in shape as well."

"It's getting there, Jim. Chris is doing a good job getting it ready." McCoy frowned. "I'll go check on progress and, if needed, we'll work night and day to have it ready... just in case."

"With any luck, we won't need it." Kirk stood to leave. "I'll be on the bridge. Spock, are you coming?"

"Yes, Captain. I will be there after I check on Mr. Scott's progress in engineering."

S

Two days later, Doctors McCoy and Chapel surveyed their progress. "Well, at least two monitor beds are working." McCoy muttered. "I hope we don't have to use them, but when the Klingons are involved, you can never tell."

"A little more work and we'll have sickbay in tiptop shape," Christine adjusted one of the monitor's readouts. "All the supplies are in order and all the equipment has been checked out. We just have to get the other beds working."

"That's good." McCoy took another appraising look around. "And just in time. We're only hours away from reaching Neural. I'll probably be in my quarters if you need me -- time for me to straighten up in there now that sickbay is nearly ready." McCoy smiled at the other doctor. "And it's time you got back to your research."

S

Later that day, Kirk joined Spock and Mr. Scott in the transporter room. "Where's Bones?" he asked as he entered the room.

The Captain's question was answered by a blur of movement through the door, going straight to the transporter pad. "Okay, okay, I'm here. I don't know why I have to beam down with you, Jim. You're the person they want to handle the negotiations."

Kirk grinned as McCoy shifted uneasily on the hated contraption. "Now, Bones. You know I need you there. These negotiations could become messy if there are Klingons around."

"Captain, there are no sensor readings of Klingon ships in the area." Spock interjected. "It would appear that the ships that preceded us have convinced the Klingons it would not be to their advantage to remain."

McCoy grunted. "Why doesn't that make me feel any better? I don't trust the Klingons as far as I could throw them."

The Vulcan eyes searched the ceiling for patience. "Dr. McCoy, I do not believe there is any relevancy between the distance a person is able to throw another person and their reliability."

"Dammit, Spock," McCoy retorted. "It's only a figure of speech. Must you always take things so literally?"

Kirk tried unsuccessfully to stifle a grin. Yes, things are returning to normal. "That's enough, gentlemen. It's time for us to beam down. Tyree and some of his people are to meet us."

The three of them took their places on the transporter pad. Just as the transporter beam started to disassemble their atoms, Mr. Scott heard McCoy's voice, "I sure hope Scotty has this thing working right."

S

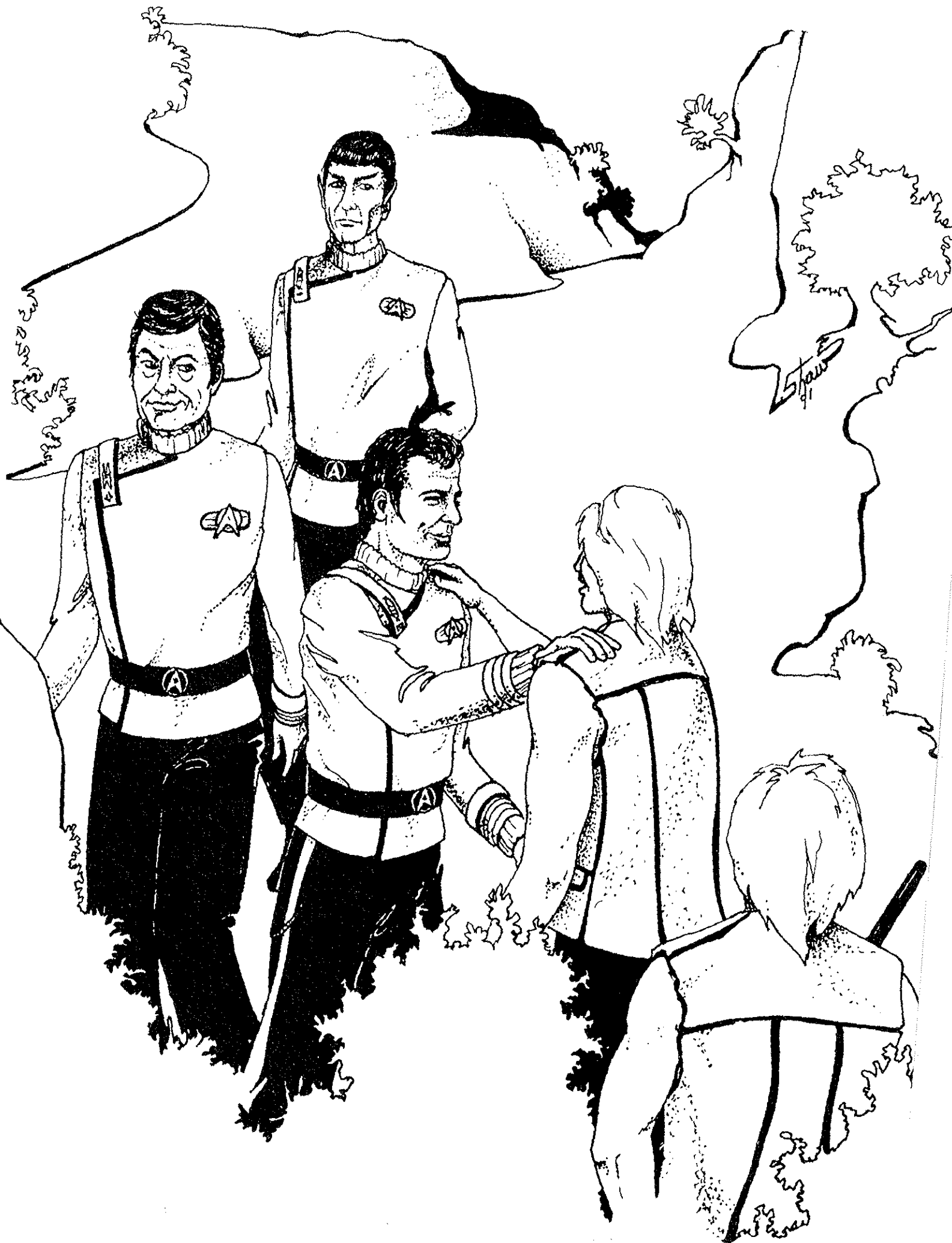
The Enterprise officers materialized in a clearing just outside of Tyree's camp. The area was secluded, surrounded by trees and bushes native to Neural. The evening breeze was pleasant, and suggestions of wildflowers pervaded their senses. Moments later, Tyree and another person walked from behind the rocks to greet them.

"James, my friend." Tyree greeted him with a hug. "Welcome back to our home." Turning to McCoy, he added, "and greetings to you, as well, Doctor." Then, glancing at Spock he queried, "And you are another friend of James?"

Kirk's hand went up to rest on the Vulcan's shoulder. "Yes, Tyree. This is Mr. Spock, my second-in-command and a good and trusted friend."

Spock nodded his head as a gesture of greeting. "I am pleased to meet you, Tyree. The Captain has spoken of you often."

Tyree's head dipped slightly in a small bow. "You are welcome, Mr. Spock. Any friend of James is a friend of my people." Turning to his companion, he added. "I would



like you to meet Kholee who is my second-in-charge." Kholee mimiced Tyree's short bow. "Kholee would become leader of my people should I become unable to lead. My people trust him as they do me," he smiled as he looked at the young man as a father regarding a beloved son. "It was necessary for my people to select a second-in-charge when we were at war. Hopefully, now that both sides wish peace, his services will not be needed for many days and nights to come." Tyree absently rubbed his eyes. "Come, James, Doctor, Mr. Spock. We can go to my camp to discuss the situation.



Tyree's camp had not changed from when Kirk was last here. Tyree's cave was spacious and was surrounded by dwellings belonging to other hill people. Once arriving, the Enterprise officers were offered a refreshing native beverage. Kirk did not waste any time getting down to business. "Tyree, what exactly is happening? Why the sudden change in attitude by the villagers?"

"I believe the villagers realized that there was an ulterior motive behind the willingness of the Klingons to help. Once they supplied subspace communications, the demands of the Klingons became more difficult to meet." Tyree paused to catch his breath. His difficulty breathing did not escape McCoy's observant gaze. Tyree continued, "The leader of the villagers met secretly with me, and the result of our discussions was that joining the Federation would return us to our peaceful relationship and protect us from the Klingons."

Kholee added, "Shortly after that agreement, the family of the village leader was found dead. It is our belief it was punishment by the Klingons for his betrayal."

"I fail to understand why our services are needed," Spock queried. "If both parties concur, then why are further negotiations between your people and the villagers required? Do the villagers know of the Federation?"

Tyree poured more of the liquid into his glass. Some of it spilled over the rim, which he did not seem to notice. "Yes, I have told them of the Federation, at least as much as I could from information James told me. Unfortunately, some of the villagers still believe the Klingons are on their side and they plan to overthrow their leader." Tyree's voice became intense. "It is necessary that these negotiations proceed before they accomplish their goal." A dry cough followed the sentence but it was quickly stilled.

McCoy, who had been observing Tyree, wanted to get Kirk alone. "Tyree, Captain, why don't we let Tyree get some rest. You can start planning your strategy in the morning."

Kirk wanted to continue the discussion, but sensed there was a motive behind the Doctor's suggestion. "Well, okay. Tyree, I'd prefer we stay on the planet. We don't need to give the Klingons any more indication that we're here, so I've instructed Scotty to keep the Enterprise on a high orbit -- is there somewhere we can stay?"

"Of course, James. I had planned on you staying here." Tyree stood up and momentarily lost his balance, quickly regaining it. "If you will come with me, we have set up accommodations for you and your friends."

The Enterprise officers followed, and McCoy took the opportunity to pull out his tricorder to do a quick scan of Kholee. He needed to calibrate for the alien physiology.

He then scanned Tyree briefly. Spock took notice of McCoy's actions. "Doctor, may I ask what you are doing?"

Spock's question caused Kirk, Tyree and Kholee to stop and turn. McCoy glared at Spock and cursed under his breath. "I was just calibrating my tricorder for the hill people." He explained through clenched teeth, hoping no one would question further. "Just in case," he added.

The explanation appeared to satisfy everyone. Tyree led the men to their beds for the night, which were located in a cave not far from Tyree's. "If there is anything more I can do, please let me know."

"We're fine, Tyree." Kirk replied. "We'll see you first thing in the morning." Tyree left the officers alone. The Captain turned to McCoy. "What was all that back there with the tricorder, Bones?"

McCoy looked at his tricorder to review the readings. "Jim, I suspect there is something wrong with Tyree. I'm not sure what, but I noticed some signs that he was having trouble breathing." He paused while he made some adjustments on the tricorder. "He also appears to be having problems with his eyesight and equilibrium."

"I agree with the Doctor," Spock added. "I noticed that when he was speaking to one of us, he was not focusing on us directly -- merely only looking in our direction. There was never any focused eye contact made."

"Thank you, Doctor Spock," McCoy retorted, ignoring the immediate arched eyebrow on the Vulcan's face. "I'd really like to examine him more closely. However, the tricorder isn't going to be enough. While he is humanoid, there is too much variation in physiology. I need a more exact calibration of my instruments in order to get an accurate assessment."

The implications of the Doctor's statement concerned the Captain. "Any idea how serious it is, Bones? Can you bring the equipment to the planet?"

"No to both questions," the Doctor replied. "It could be nothing more than a middle ear infection or a cold, but I just don't know. And I can't bring the ship's computer to the planet -- you know that."

Kirk thought about the situation. He knew these negotiations were important. But if Tyree was ill... "I'm going to speak with Tyree," Kirk pronounced suddenly, and was gone before McCoy or Spock could protest.

S

Kirk located Tyree in a clearing not far from their initial meeting place. The area was set up as a practice area for target shooting. He stood back, watching Tyree as he used a rifle provided by the Federation as part as the "balance of power" agreement. Kirk had instructed Tyree on the use of their first weapon supplied, the flintlock, and Tyree had proven to be an excellent sharpshooter. However, what he was observing was far from the adept student he had instructed years ago. The shots Tyree was firing was not merely missing the target, but missing the target by an enormous distance. Wanting to get closer, he stepped on a branch and the noise startled Tyree.

"Who... oh, James. Can I do something for you?" Tyree asked when he saw who it was.

"I couldn't sleep," was the lame excuse. "I can't help thinking about the negotiations and the Klingons. Mind if I join you?"

"Of course not, James." Tyree picked up another rifle and handed it to the Human.

After several minutes of target practice, Kirk concluded there was indeed something wrong with his friend. "Tyree, we are friends. I'm concerned about you. Dr. McCoy has noticed you are having problems breathing. And your eyesight -- are you okay?"

Tyree glanced toward the targets, then back in the Human's direction. "McCoy is very observant. I have been having problems for quite some time. I have been experiencing pain, but have been able to control it, and I cannot go to our healers." Tyree paused, catching his breath. "It is a sign of weakness, and if any of my people, or the villagers realize I am imperfect, it will jeopardize the negotiations." Again he drew in a deep breath. "It could also mean my death if my people sense I can no longer capably lead them. This is why I chose Kholee as my second-in-charge. I know, should anything happen to me, peaceful negotiations will continue. He is highly respected among my people."

Kirk did not care for the implication of Tyree's last statement and knew, despite Starfleet regulations against it, what his decision must be. "Tyree, come to my ship. Dr. McCoy can determine what is wrong and treat the problem."

"You mean I can be healed on your ship, James?" Tyree sounded expectant. "My eyesight will return and the difficulty I am having breathing will cease? You can do all this?"

The Captain hesitated. He was sure they could help Tyree, but that was up to McCoy. He gave little thought to the reprimand he might receive from Starfleet for disregarding the noninterference policy. "It's not quite that easy. I'm not a medical man. But if there is a way, Dr. McCoy will do it." Kirk said.

Tyree was not sure. "James, what about the negotiations? We cannot leave here now."

Kirk knew Tyree was right, however he was willing to gamble that a day would not make a difference. "Just for one day. Let's see what McCoy can do. Then we can return and start the negotiations." The Captain desperately wanted to find out what was wrong. "We can go tonight so Dr. McCoy can begin tests first thing in the morning after a good night's rest. McCoy, Spock and I will go aboard and come back with a shuttle to take you to the ship." He could not use the transporter -- not with someone who had no knowledge of technology above subspace communications. But his thoughts were more on how he was going to explain -- and convince -- Spock and Bones of his plans.

"Well, James. If you believe it is safe." Tyree agreed. "But only for one day. We must tell Kholee our plans, but no one else. He can be trusted."

Kirk did not like the idea of anyone knowing their plans. However, he was not going to argue. "Okay, if you must tell him I will trust your judgment. For now, go and

rest until we return. The shuttle will be in the clearing where we met earlier," the Captain explained. "It would be better if no one was with you when we pick you up."

Tyree nodded. "I understand, James. You are offering something you should not offer. I only hope you do not regret it." Tyree and Kirk left to go in the direction of the camp.



"Captain, Starfleet regulations prohibit such an action since we are dealing with a non-Federation planet." Spock pointed out after Kirk had explained his plan. "The negotiations are of prime importance. And what you plan could result in..."

"I've made the decision. Tyree is ill and his life might be in jeopardy." Noting the questioning looks from his two friends, he explained Tyree's situation. "I will take full responsibility for the delay. We will beam up this evening to prepare for Tyree's visit. Spock and I will return with a shuttlecraft to transport Tyree to the ship."

Spock knew the Captain's mind was made up, and he did not really approve. However, McCoy knew this was the only chance he would have to determine if he could help Tyree. His medical compassion and duty overshadowed any regulations. "Well, Jim. I can't see any culture being so primitive as to kill people who are 'imperfect.' As much as this goes against Spock's better judgment, I say okay."

"Thanks, Bones." Kirk noticed Spock was silent. "Spock, do you have something more to say?"

"Captain... Jim." Spock replied. "What you are planning is not wise. To bring Tyree aboard the Enterprise will expose him to technology far beyond what has been supplied under the 'balance of power' agreement. You will be going against the Prime Directive, and we are not certain there is anything seriously wrong with Tyree. If there is, there is no guarantee, despite the Doctor's expertise, that he will be able to help Tyree within the time restriction of one day."

"I'm not sure about that, Spock. Starfleet has already 'interfered' with this planet. Tyree knows who and what we are. Besides, they are applying for admission into the Federation. They'll know all about us in a few days anyway." Kirk grinned. "And my mind is made up. Once Tyree is settled, you and I can return to the planet in the morning to confer with Kholee. Tyree believes he can be trusted totally." Kirk hesitated. "I trust Tyree's judgment. Besides, it's probably something Bones can treat quickly so we can return to our business here on the planet." Kirk flipped open his communicator to contact Mr. Scott. "Gentlemen, let's go. We've got work to do. Scotty, three to beam up."



From a distance, the man who emerged from the shuttle did not look ill to the untrained eye. However, McCoy could tell that Tyree was in pain, even though he was functioning under his own power and apparently had not slept for some time. Tyree turned to McCoy, "If you don't mind, I am very tired and could use some rest."

McCoy understood the implication and knew Tyree wanted privacy. However, he did insist that Tyree take that rest in sickbay so he could be monitored. Kirk, Spock and McCoy had decided the less Tyree saw of the ship the better in case entrance into the

Federation was not achieved. Besides, McCoy was going to need some control readings before he started evaluating the alien's condition in the morning.

A gurney had been ordered, but Tyree waived it off, indicating he would travel under his own power. Great, McCoy thought, another James Kirk, as he and the Captain accompanied Tyree to sickbay, ready to lend support if necessary.

As they walked the corridors in silence, McCoy noted that Tyree showed little, if any, interest in his surroundings. Since this was his first visit aboard a starship, that could only indicate that the proud man was using all his will to appear under control. All McCoy wanted was to get him to sickbay and determine exactly what was wrong. McCoy and Kirk exchanged concerned glances as they reached sickbay and helped Tyree onto the bed. Quietly turning on the monitors, McCoy noted that the pain indicator was very high and was accompanied by an elevated pulse, rapid respirations and high blood pressure.

Once Tyree was settled, Kirk motioned that they should leave to give him the rest he wanted... and needed.

McCoy nodded in agreement. "We'll let you rest for now. If you need anything, just push this," McCoy instructed as he pointed to the intercom button. "We'll be back in the morning."

Before they left Tyree to rest, McCoy administered a mild sedative that he believed would be safe for Tyree.

Kirk and McCoy went to the doctor's office. As soon as the door closed, Kirk asked, "Bones -- what's wrong with him? He looks much worse than he did on the planet a short time ago."

The Doctor shook his head. "I'll know more in the morning. My guess is that he was using all his strength to hide his problems. Once he realized we knew something was wrong, he no longer had to be a pinnacle of strength. Right now, he's experiencing a tremendous amount of pain. As soon as I know something, I'll let you know."

S

The next afternoon, McCoy sat behind his desk and studied the reports in front of him on the computer. He had spent all morning running tests on Tyree. Luckily, the alien physiology was very close to Human and he was able to adjust his equipment accordingly to obtain accurate readings.

Kirk and Spock entered the office. "Bones, I was just talking to Tyree. He said you had finished your exam. What did you find out?"

"I've told Tyree what I've found, but haven't discussed the alternatives," he said as he scanned the information in front of him. "He has a brain tumor." He let that sink in a moment before continuing. "It's in the occipital lobe of his brain. It's growing pretty quickly from what I can tell, though I have no idea when it first appeared."

Kirk heaved a hesitant sigh of relief. "That means you can remove it, right? Tyree will be okay?"

"It's not that easy, Jim." McCoy hated this. "The problem is twofold. First, the tumor is putting pressure on the respiratory center, that's the reason for the difficulty in

breathing he is experiencing. I've started some temporary symptomatic treatment." The Doctor paused and turned off his computer. "The main problem is the location of the tumor. The optic nerve is too involved. To remove the tumor would leave Tyree blind."

"That's better than dead, isn't it?" Kirk asked, not understanding the difficulty.

"I feel surgery is the only alternative. Blindness by itself should not pose a real handicap. But if we remove the tumor, the respiratory center will probably be damaged. Depending on the extent of the damage, he may only live a few months, but it may be a permanent cure. Surgery is undoubtedly the only choice. If nothing else, it will give us time. When I told him about the tumor, he figured out for himself that he may not be able to see. He told me he had to be 'perfect' when he returned home." McCoy shook his head. "I don't really understand what he means. Maybe we should talk to him together." McCoy stood up to lead the men to Tyree's bed.

Spock blocked his path. "If I may suggest, Doctor, "we do not know everything there is to know about Tyree's culture. Depending on the cultural taboos, he may not be able to have surgery. It is his decision."

"That's crazy, Spock! We're talking about life!" McCoy took a calming breath. "Look, we have to make him understand that blindness, while it is a handicap, can be easily dealt with and that the surgery will give him a longer life."

Kirk led the approach to Tyree's bed. Tyree was dozing, but came alert at the sound of footsteps. "Hello, James. Doctor. Mr. Spock."

"How are you feeling, Tyree?" Kirk asked.

"I am feeling better, thank you, James." Tyree replied. "I assume the Doctor has told you what he has found?"

"Yes I have, Tyree. Now we need to discuss what to do next." McCoy started. "We can remove the tumor and I believe we should as soon as possible."

"Will there be no lasting effects? Can I return to my people as I was?" Tyree asked.

McCoy shook his head. "Well, not exactly. Because of the location of the tumor, I'm afraid you will be blind after the surgery. But, with medical technology, we will be able to..."

"No, then surgery is not possible," Tyree interrupted. "What will happen if I do not have the operation?"

"Your eyesight and breathing will become worse and you will only live a few months at most. Maybe as little as a few days." McCoy was desperate. "But, Tyree... why not surgery? You can lead a productive life. We have visors or receptors that you can be fitted with that will restore sight of sorts," McCoy encouraged. "If we're lucky you will live out a normal span."

"You do not understand, Doctor. Our culture demands that its leaders be perfect. Any imperfection is felt to make a person inferior." Tyree's breathing became very shallow and rapid. "As leader of my people, if I were to return unable to see on my own, I would be killed in my sleep."

"That's ridiculous. We can help you... There are visors you can wear... "

"Bones, not now," Kirk chided.

"Wait a damn minute!" McCoy retorted. "Remember Miranda? No one knew she was blind until I told you... " McCoy stopped when he noticed Kirk's glare. He would have to pick up his argument later.

Kirk sighed in relief. "Tyree, is there anything we can do for you now?"

The man on the monitor bed looked from one officer to the next. "Yes, there is. James, I would like you to take the responsibility for me."

Kirk looked at Spock and McCoy. "What do you mean, 'responsibility?'" Kirk asked even though he was afraid he knew what the man was asking.

"You heard the Doctor explain that my breathing will become worse. Eventually, I may not be able to make any decisions about my future. I need you to accept that responsibility, James." Tyree paused to catch his breath. "And I want you to abide by my wishes. I want the normal course of this... tumor to occur. If that is to be death, then allow me to die."

McCoy was furious. "No doubt about it. You will die!"

Kirk's sharp look silenced the Doctor, then he turned back to his sick friend. "We can talk about this later, Tyree. After you've given it some thought." Kirk was honored that Tyree wanted him to take the responsibility, but at the same time, he was not looking forward to having to make the decision he was asked to make. The Captain knew that there would be difficult times ahead. However, he had to do what he felt was right. "Right now, I think you should get some rest." Kirk suggested, without agreeing immediately to Tyree's request. He turned to McCoy. "Is there anything you can do to make him more comfortable?"

"Yes, Jim. I'll have Chris see to it right away," was McCoy's terse reply.

They left the patient to his rest.



After Spock left sickbay, Kirk followed McCoy to his office. "Bones, can I talk to you?"

"What about?" McCoy quipped, as he went around his desk and sat down.

Without invitation, the Captain sat in the chair opposite McCoy. "About life and death... and Tyree."

The Doctor hesitated. "Why me? You seem to know all the answers."

Kirk knew McCoy was irritated. "Look, Bones. I know what you're thinking. I haven't made any decision regarding Tyree's request. I have very mixed feelings."

The Doctor appeared to relax. "Jim, I can't condone a death sentence. I took an oath... to not voluntarily harm any life form."

"I understand your feelings. I agree with them. However, we're talking about a totally different culture... one that my kill Tyree if we force him back into society. I don't understand it and I plan to discuss it with Tyree before I decide." Kirk paused. "But if he is doomed to death by his people, why should we not abide by his wishes? Wouldn't sending him back to his people be doing harm as well?"

"That may be true to a point," the Doctor agreed. "But I would not be pulling the trigger. I can give him a full life... and a useful one."

Kirk could not help but wonder if McCoy was thinking about his father. "We wouldn't be pulling the trigger... we would just be letting 'nature takes its course' as if we never knew what was wrong in the first place."

"But we do know what's wrong," McCoy said, frustrated. "And we can help him. That changes things."

"From our perspective, yes it does." Kirk agreed. "Tyree sees it differently. Now that he knows he will eventually die, he has to make a decision based on his knowledge and the rules of his society. We don't have the right to force our values on him."

"Yeah, I know." McCoy replied with resignation. "But I don't have to agree with it... or like it!"

Kirk stood up. "As I said, I'm going to discuss this with Tyree later. Maybe I can reason with him."

"I hope you can, Jim-boy," McCoy muttered.

Kirk paused at the door, and turned back to McCoy. "Maybe I made a mistake bringing Tyree to the ship." He left without waiting for McCoy's comment.



Later that day, Kirk entered sickbay and found Tyree awake. "Tyree, are you up to talking?"

"Yes, James. Please sit down. I assume you wish to discuss the favor I asked of you earlier?"

Kirk nodded. "This is a big decision -- for both you and me. Are you positive you don't want McCoy to do the surgery?"

"I have decided, James. If you cannot act for me, then I will request you return me to my home." The patient was laboring with the pain the tumor was causing. "I have given this a lot of thought, while my mind is still capable of it. The Doctor explained that I may have trouble thinking as I become sicker."

"No, Tyree. I didn't mean to imply I'm not willing to abide by your wishes. It's just that," Kirk paused and stood closer to Tyree. "I've never questioned Dr. McCoy's medical judgment. It will be difficult. He then had an idea. "Why can't you let Kholee take over and you step down. You could be his advisor."

"That would not be possible. If I were to step down, it would be a sign of weakness. Kholee would be forced to kill me or suffer humiliation. The trust that he has

earned would be lost." Tyree took a deep breath. "This is why I have made this request of you, James. I understand that what I am asking is not easy."

"You're right, it's not easy," the Human said. "However, if this is what you truly want, I will abide by your decision."

Tyree looked tired. "It is what I want. Kholee is trusted as I am among my people. He can carry on the negotiations and he will trust you as I do. Even the villagers know him as a leader among my people. You can explain my absence from the negotiations truthfully. Tell them I am dying. They will then look to Kholee without questioning my absence." He paused and glanced toward McCoy's office. "The Doctor wants me to live, and I have little strength to fight him. James, you must fight for me, take the responsibility for my life... and death. I trust you, my brother."

"Thank you for that. I will not let you down." Kirk was desperately tired and wanted to get off the subject. "I'm going to go down and meet with Kholee this evening and discuss what is going on. It may be possible for you to stay with us for a while. However, the negotiations need to begin." Kirk placed his hand on Tyree's. "Don't worry. I'll keep you informed of the progress on the planet. If something happens and you do need to be there, we'll worry about that later. You get some rest now."

"Good night, my brother... and thank you."

"Thank you? For allowing you to die? I understand your reasons, but I'll take no 'thank you's' for it. I'd rather take you and shake you until you agree to live. But you have your reasons and I have to abide by them. I don't have to agree." Kirk left sickbay and went to find Spock to accompany him to the planet.

S

The next morning, as dawn beamed over the planet below, Kirk called McCoy and Spock to the briefing room to discuss the situation with Tyree and his people. He was sitting at the conference table when McCoy and Spock entered. "Bones. Spock. Come in and have a seat."

The two officers settled into their chairs and waited.

"Bones, as you know, Spock and I went down to the planet yesterday evening. It appears negotiations are going to be pretty easy -- the small group of villagers on the side of the Klingons, have been captured." Kirk smiled. "Because of this fortunate turn of events, it will be safe to keep Tyree aboard a while longer so we can keep him comfortable."

Spock continued the train of thought. "It will be easier for progress to be made with those villagers unable to make trouble. Once an agreement is reached, and Neural is a member of the Federation, they will no longer be in a position to cause any problems."

"Have you told Tyree?" McCoy asked. "I'm sure he'll be pleased."

"Yes I have. He was very happy." Kirk sat thoughtful for a moment. "I also want to discuss the request Tyree made of me yesterday regarding his life."

"Now, Jim," McCoy cajoled. "Don't tell me you're going along with his request. I told you, we can help him..."

"Doctor, if I may ask a question," Spock interrupted. "In your professional judgment, is Tyree competent to make such a decision?"

The Doctor glanced at Kirk, then to Spock. He replied "Well, yes, but..."

"Then I suggest it is his decision to make," Spock stated.

McCoy started to protest, but Kirk cut him off. "I've given it a lot of thought. I've spoken to Kholee and seen him in action with the leader of the villagers as well as with his own people. Tyree is right, Kholee is trusted as much as Tyree." The Captain hesitated. "I've decided to honor Tyree's wishes and accept the responsibility for his life."

"And your decision is?" McCoy questioned.

"To let him die as he wishes. And that means life support is not to be started."

McCoy was angry at Kirk's willingness to give up on Tyree so easily. "Why did you agree with Tyree, Jim? We don't know that we won't be able to talk him into letting us help him."

"Bones, calm down." Kirk glanced toward Spock. "What do you think, Spock?"

"Though I have not known Tyree as you have, Jim, I believe he has considered his decision fully. He appears intelligent enough, and the Doctor agrees he is competent to make a decision about his future."

Kirk shook his head in frustration. "Not that, Spock. What do you think about that decision?"

"What I think of his decision is irrelevant, Jim. It is his decision to make." Spock was obviously uncomfortable about being put on the spot.

McCoy was furious. "Spock, you of all people... I thought Vulcans revered life above everything! How could you condone his decision when there is help available for him. The surgery will give us more time... maybe we can find a way to save him."

"Doctor, I did not say I agree with his decision. I was merely saying that he is entitled to his decision and his beliefs. He asked the Captain to act for him and the Captain said yes."

"That's stupid! We can't just let him die without lifting a finger, no matter what he wants!" McCoy spun on Kirk. "And you're helping him!"

"Bones," Kirk started, then paused. It seemed his discussion with McCoy yesterday had not calmed the Doctor. "How much of your protest has to do with the guilt over your father's death? You went through it with him. You know you made the right decision. Try to understand that I believe I'm making the right decision here." Kirk stated, and immediately regretted his words. This was not the time to bring this up and he prepared himself mentally for the Doctor's reaction.

"This has nothing to do with my father!" McCoy snapped. "We can help Tyree -- my father couldn't be helped. They are two totally different cases." McCoy was uncomfortable with the subject of his father and tried to get back to the subject at hand. "I just don't understand why you agreed so easily to act on his behalf and support his desire to die. Why, Jim?"

Kirk believed that McCoy's feelings about Tyree were intertwined with the feelings about his father. It might take time to make his friend understand that. Kirk worded his reply very carefully. "To preserve his dignity."

Anger showed erupted on McCoy's face. The very words he had uttered in response to Sybok's question were being turned on him. "That's a low blow, Jim. If you're planning on letting Tyree die to prove something to me, you can forget it!" He turned and stormed out of the briefing room.

Kirk turned to Spock. "It seems, lately, that I never know the right thing to say to him." He rubbed the back of his neck, hoping it would make the tense feeling go away.

"I do not believe that you said the wrong thing. The Doctor is merely not ready to hear it," Spock considered carefully. "He has to deal with his feelings and will come to us when he is ready. For now, you and I must be patient."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. But as you know, Spock, patience is not one of my better points." Kirk grinned.

Spock's eyebrow rose. "Yes, I know." Kirk seemed to ignore Spock's acceptance of his statement. "Sybok's technique of relieving pain requires many contacts to be successful. If the contact is not continued, the pain will be relieved at first, but then will become fresh, and the individual must deal with it again."

"And, as we know," Kirk added, "it is difficult when the pain is as deep and as intense as Bones'." He saw the Vulcan nod in agreement. "I will try to be patient." The Captain stood up. "Well, I'm going to the bridge. I'll see you later?" Kirk headed toward the door.

"Yes, Jim. I'm going to inspect the science lab before I go to the bridge." Spock replied, following Kirk out into the corridor.

S

After leaving the briefing room, Leonard McCoy went to the lab and found it empty. Sitting at the computer terminal, he switched it on and accessed Chapel's research. He was searching for any glimmer of hope... any way to help Tyree and convince Jim. In his concentration, he did not hear the door to the lab open. His reading was interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Is there something I can help you with, Doctor?" Spock asked. "I am familiar with Dr. Chapel's research. Are you looking for something specific?"

The Doctor was startled by the intrusion, made no attempt to hide his displeasure. "No, thank you, Mr. Spock. You must have better things to do. I can read Christine's research results and am fully capable of analyzing the data on my own."

"I apologize, I did not mean to imply any lack of competence," the Vulcan stated. "If I may be so bold, may I suggest you explore your feelings and determine your true motivation regarding your objection to Tyree's wishes?"

McCoy turned toward Spock, anger evident on his face. "And just what the hell do you know about feelings, Spock?"

The Vulcan hesitated. "I will leave you alone, Doctor. If you should need any assistance, do not forget both the Captain and I are available." Spock turned to leave.

"Wait, Spock," McCoy called to the Vulcan. "Look, I'm sorry. I don't know what gets into me sometimes. Maybe it's because everyone has assumed that I want to save Tyree for reasons other than professional ones."

A few moments passed before Spock acknowledged the Doctor's statement. He did not know whether he should bring up the subject of McCoy's father. He knew the Doctor was in emotional pain and as yet had not admitted to it. He decided to attempt to help. "Dr. McCoy, I would like to explain something to you that I have already explained to the Captain." Spock returned to the chair by McCoy and sat down. "Sybok's method of removing one's emotional pain can be successful. But only if several contacts are made. With you, there was only one attempt. The result of that one attempt was to bring your pain to the surface. I do not claim to understand the Human psyche; however I have observed that the pain of guilt can be very debilitating."

While listening to Spock, McCoy fought the urge to tell him to stop -- to leave him alone. He was touched by the Vulcan's display of concern, but felt it was misdirected. "Spock, I do appreciate your concern. You must believe me... and so must Jim... when I say my feelings about my father are not interfering with my judgment as far as Tyree goes. I'm too old to let some silly emotion such as guilt bother me in the performance of my work."

The Vulcan stood to leave. "If you say it is so, then I will accept it. And I believe the Captain will as well. He is merely concerned about you." Spock hesitated, unsure as to whether he should continue. He went to the door and paused, "You have many friends aboard the Enterprise. You should not hesitate to turn to them." He signalled the door to open.

McCoy was unaccustomed to Spock's display of overt concern. He knew the Vulcan counted himself among his friends, without directly voicing so. He also knew this could not be easy for Spock. "Spock, wait. Look, I'm not good at this friendship thing when I'm doing the receiving. I'm sorry for the way I've acted. Thanks for your concern. One of my biggest regrets is that my father never met some of my friends in Starfleet." McCoy hesitated. "But most of all, I wish he could have met you and Jim."

"I'm sure I would have enjoyed meeting him as well." With that the Vulcan left for the bridge.

Once alone, McCoy shut off the computer terminal. He knew a lot of what Spock had said was true. But he could not convince himself that Jim and Spock were right about the guilt he felt about his father. It was not interfering with his treatment of Tyree. He left the lab and went to check on Tyree.

S

Later that evening, McCoy returned to his quarters after an unsuccessful attempt to eat. Looking at the packed boxes still bordering his quarters, he decided to shower and go to bed early. The boxes sure were not going anywhere. He was almost afraid to sleep, but he knew he had to get some rest. No sooner did his eyes close than the nightmare began.

His father's face was distorted in pain. The same words kept coming from his mouth.

"Release me. Please, Leonard."

"Dad, I can't. You know I can't. Don't ask me any more."

"Please, Leonard. Release me. I can't stand the pain any longer."

"Dad, please don't." He sat next to his father's life support bed. He took one of his father's withered hands and grasped it tightly. "Dad, you don't understand."

"Do you love me, Leonard?"

"Of course, Dad. Don't you know how much I love you?"

"Yes, Leonard. I know. Then you must do as I say."

His father was helpless — and in pain. Dying from a disease with no cure. But McCoy had taken an oath ... not to do harm. "Dad, please forgive me..." Leonard McCoy shut off the life support keeping the shell that used to be his father alive. The withered hand he had been holding became cold and clammy. McCoy laid the hand on his father's chest. He brushed his father's forehead with a light kiss and turned to leave.

"WHY DID YOU KILL ME, LEONARD?" His father's eyes snapped open but only the whites could be seen. "Why listen to an old man?" A white hand, veins bulging, clutched McCoy's coat. "They have a cure, but you killed me too soon." He tried to tear away from the hand but it was drawing him down toward those sightless eyes.

McCoy bolted out of the dream, his body shaking and wet. "Will these nightmares ever stop? Damn Sybok anyway -- he didn't take the pain away -- he just made it worse by making me relive the whole damn thing."

McCoy laid back down for awhile, but when sleep would not return, he got up and dressed. He tried to read but found he could not concentrate. Looking at his chronometer, he sighed, "Only a couple hours of sleep again... if you can call it sleep." Looking around his quarters, McCoy decided to go for a walk.

McCoy wandered aimlessly and found himself on the observation deck. Luckily, it was deserted. The view of space was impressive, even to McCoy. The vastness of space was enough to make anyone seem small in comparison. "Why the hell did I come here," McCoy muttered to himself. He sat down in one of the lounge chairs and thought about all the planets -- the people on them. They all have problems. I'm sitting here worrying



about my insignificant problems when there's a whole universe out there with problems much more important than mine. He thought about Sybok and how much he had wanted to believe that Sybok had, indeed, taken away his pain. But no, you were right again, Jim. The pain didn't go away -- but it did rear its ugly head in a way it had never done before. "Maybe I do need the pain -- but can't it stay hidden where it's been all these years?" McCoy asked of the silence around him. And now there's this situation with Tyree to deal with, he added to himself. He didn't really believe that Jim would let Tyree die to prove to McCoy that he had been right to let his father go. Two wrongs never made a right.

He remembered the day the cure to his father's illness was found as though it was yesterday. An absolute cure, the experts said. "Sure," McCoy mumbled "as long as the patient is relatively healthy." But his father was not. The cure would not have worked. He knew that intellectually, but on a deeper, much more emotional level, he could not be sure.

If only I had waited... we could have tried the medication. It's not fair for a person to be asked to kill a parent. It's just not fair! McCoy sat, his head in his hands, once again putting himself through the burden of that decision. Am I truly being objective with Tyree? Or am I being influenced by my father? No, it can't be... can it? Even if it is affecting my judgment, don't I have a right to fight for his life? I am a doctor! He stared out at the stars. "Guess I answered my own question -- no wonder this is a favorite place for people to come -- it helps a person deal with their problems; helps them put their problems in perspective. It makes them go away."

"Not always, Bones. It may make your problems seem insignificant, but it doesn't make them go away." Kirk had entered just as his friend was speaking about the merits of the observation deck.

McCoy immediately drew himself together. "Can't anyone have a little privacy around here?" he asked gruffly, upset that he had not noticed Kirk.

"Sorry, Bones," Kirk said, immediately feeling like an intruder. "I really didn't know anyone was up here. I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd take a walk." Kirk hesitated... "Do you want to talk?"

McCoy stood and faced Kirk. For a moment he wanted to let his defenses down... to talk. But not now. He wasn't ready. Instead, he stood to leave. "You don't have a monopoly on not being able to sleep, Captain. But, I'll go back to my quarters where I can have some privacy." After a brief pause, he added, "By the way, remind me never to give you control over MY life!" He left a speechless Kirk behind him as he left the observation deck.

McCoy's initial hesitation was not lost on Kirk. Now, I hope bringing Tyree aboard was not a mistake for two reasons, Kirk thought. "I wish I was a psychologist," He mumbled as he turned toward the observation window. "Life and death decisions are always difficult -- but more so when friends or family are involved." Kirk sighed as he stared out into space, momentarily allowing himself to enjoy the world that was his -- the stars. This was not a place he came to hide, like so many others. This was his strength -- his life. They renewed him in ways he could never explain to others. It was life, and he reveled in it. He had come here for the beauty and peace this place always gave him -- but not tonight. Even though McCoy had left, his presence lingered. Kirk resolved to be more patient with his friend. It was just so damn hard.

S

Dr. Chapel entered the Chief Medical Officer's office the following day before going to lunch to find McCoy asleep with his head down on his desk. "Leonard?" she asked softly.

McCoy jerked his head up as though startled. "Chris, come on in. Guess I didn't get much sleep last night." He smiled in an attempt to let his colleague know there was nothing to worry about.

Chapel was not fooled, but decided not to press the issue. "Did you want to see me?"

"Yes. I wanted to discuss Tyree's case with you. It seems your research goes hand in hand with his condition. He refuses surgery because it will leave him blind. However, I was wondering..."

"Whether I would be able to help him?" Dr. Chapel completed the question. McCoy nodded. "Unfortunately, my research has not even reached a point that I would be willing to try it on anyone. And, even if it were, I wouldn't try it on a friend. I wouldn't want Tyree to be a 'human guinea pig'."

"But you never know when you'll have a major breakthrough," McCoy commented. "There may be a chance..."

"Leonard, you know there has to be a certain amount of testing before anything could be used. Even if the breakthrough were to occur today, it would be months before it would be an acceptable treatment," Chris explained.

"But if Tyree had the surgery, it would give him a year or more."

"There are no guarantees, Leonard."

Dad all over again, McCoy thought. "Well, it was worth a try. But if something should happen with your research, Chris, please let me know immediately."

"Okay, Leonard," Chapel replied, noticing the dark circles under her colleague's eyes. "Don't you think you should try to get some sleep? I can handle things in sickbay for a while."

"Thanks. I think I will." McCoy stood and left sickbay.

S

Instead of going to his own quarters, McCoy found himself at the door to Kirk's cabin. As he knocked, there was a small part of him that hoped there would not be an answer. That hope was dashed when he heard Kirk say, "Come in." McCoy entered to find the Captain at his computer terminal. "If you're busy, Jim, I can come back later..."

"No, Bones, I was just finishing up some routine reports. I hate them -- luckily I just have to review and approve them," Kirk replied, clicking off the terminal. "Have a seat. What can I do for you?"

McCoy sat in a chair opposite Kirk. "About Tyree," McCoy hedged. "I'm sorry about getting angry last night. I guess your words hit a little close to home. It's just that the implication was that I was allowing my personal life to interfere with my professional judgment and it's not. I'm a doctor. I took an oath to save lives."

"That's okay, Bones. I know you would not let anything personal influence your judgement. I shouldn't have opened my big mouth before I thought about what I was saying." Kirk tried to smooth over the friction that was present between them.

Kirk's statement caused a slight grin to appear on the Doctor's face. "I guess it really is Tyree's decision," McCoy stated with reluctance. "However, you know, I was thinking. It will be a while before any decision has to be made about Tyree. Maybe something will break in Chapel's research -- I told you about it -- and she might be able to help Tyree return to 'normal'."

"Aren't you being a little optimistic? Didn't you say that her research hadn't even reached the clinical trials yet?"

"Yes, but research is a funny thing. You just never know what will happen." McCoy stated.

Kirk chose his next words carefully. "You're thinking about your dad, aren't you?"

McCoy stood up and crossed the room. Turning to Kirk, he said, "I also am sorry about last evening on the observation deck. I don't know what came over me." McCoy paused. "Seems like I'm apologizing a lot these days."

"Maybe my timing was just bad. I was intruding on your privacy and I had no right..."

"Yes you did." McCoy wandered around Kirk's quarters, his hand lightly touched a hologram of a sailing ship. "You've already been pulled into this mess. You have a right to intrude, especially when you are intruding with the truth. I couldn't sleep and couldn't stop thinking about my father. I took a walk and ended up on the observation deck."

"Hmmm. Don't take this the wrong way, but I can't imagine you voluntarily going to the observation deck."

"That's what I said when I got there. But as you so tactfully pointed out, I was there to escape. I know that now." McCoy picked up the hologram and murmured the words Kirk had spoke often. "All I need is a tall ship..."

"Bones, I think it is important for you to explore your feelings. And now Tyree's situation is just making it worse. It can't be easy." Kirk realized it was difficult for McCoy to open up, and knew he would avoid talking if Kirk didn't press a little harder. "I don't even have to say anything... just listen... but please don't ignore these feelings about your dad again. Now that I've seen how they are affecting you, I don't believe you can afford to bury them again." Kirk hoped the Doctor would open up about his father. "If you want to talk to Spock and I together I'm sure he would be willing to join us..."

"No, that's okay. He was in the science lab earlier. You can fill him in... besides, it is less intimidating one-on-one." McCoy stopped, trying to figure out where to start. "Besides, he said a few things that really got me thinking. You may be sorry you ever got

involved in this." He glanced briefly at Kirk and noted that the Captain was sincere and had a look of concern on his face.

"I doubt that. How many times have I pulled you into my problems?" Kirk smiled. "Besides, what are friends for?" Do you want a drink?"

McCoy shook his head as he sat down across from Kirk. "The last thing I need is to rely on a drink to enable me to talk. I just don't know where to start." McCoy appeared fascinated with a stylus on Kirk's desk. "It seems that as a child, I was always letting my father down. He was a religious man and while I attended church every Sunday, I never developed the interest he wanted me to have in becoming a clergyman."

"I thought your father was a doctor?" Kirk asked.

"Yes, he was. But he had always wanted to be a clergyman -- he opted for the medical profession to provide for his family. See, clergymen were poor people when I was growing up and Dad had a family to take care of as well as his parents." Not able to sit still, McCoy once again stood and walked around the room. "His father was also a doctor and expected him to become one as well. He did, but always resented having to make that decision. So, he wanted for me what he couldn't have for himself -- when any other father would have been proud that his son followed in his footsteps, I disappointed mine by entering the medical profession. Ironical, isn't it? But I always loved medicine and couldn't think of anything else." The Doctor shrugged his shoulders in frustration.

"Don't you think he eventually realized that medicine is what really made you happy? In the long run, that is what parents want for their children," Kirk encouraged.

"I would like to believe that," McCoy answered. "However, one of the reasons he wanted me to enter the clergy was to stay at home. He was afraid that medicine would take me away from home." McCoy returned to the chair and slumped. His hand rubbed over his eyes and around to the back of his neck. "Not only did it take me away from home, it was medicine that caused me to enter Starfleet -- something that my father was adamantly against. The day I left, my father wouldn't even see me off." He hesitated again. "That hurt me more than anything -- I wanted him to be proud of me. His rejection is what caused me to put everything into my work. In some ways, his rejection is what caused my divorce."

"But you must have made amends -- you were there when he was dying?" Kirk prompted.

"Yes, we made up on one of my shore leaves. There was still friction, but at least we reestablished our relationship. I found out that he had read every research paper I ever wrote. That made me feel good that he followed my work." McCoy smiled and looked at Kirk. "But he also wouldn't ignore a chance to remind me that I could have practiced medicine at home with the family, which usually ended up in an argument. Anyway, when I left from that shore leave, I felt somewhat better. Little did I know... " He paused and said, "I might take you up on that drink, Jim."

Kirk nodded, but made no move to get up. He wanted McCoy to keep talking. "Little did you know what?"

"During that time, my father knew he was dying and didn't tell me. He was making amends but not telling me the most important thing he had to tell me. Apparently he had told everyone who knew not to tell me." McCoy's voice took on an

angry tone. "I still hold some resentment toward members of my family for keeping that from me. I found out later that he didn't want me to know because he assumed I would give up my career in Starfleet to stay with him. He was right. I didn't know -- and still don't -- how to take that. Was he, in essence, saying he had accepted my career in Starfleet, or did he just not want me there?"

"Well, if you want my two-cents worth, I think he was telling you he had accepted your career and it was the only way he could think of saying it. But my telling you will not help if you can't accept that as the truth." Kirk paused. "I never met your father. Tell me a little about him."

McCoy stood and paced the room. "There's not much to tell. Everyone loved him. He'd do anything for someone in trouble. He'd often act without thinking about the consequences." A small grin appeared on the Doctor's face. "Reminds me of someone else I know." Kirk grinned in acknowledgment to the reference. McCoy continued. "You and my father would have gotten along very well. If there was just more time..."

Kirk knew how hard this was for his friend. "When was it you found out about his diagnosis?"

"After I retired and got home. I was really looking forward to that retirement. However, he was already bedridden. There was no cure in sight." Again, McCoy briefly looked at Kirk for emphasis. "In fact, it was shortly before you caused that 'reserve clause' in my contract to be used to bring me back to the Enterprise to go after V'ger that he asked me to stop life support. You know what happened after that. I stopped the life support and shortly after a cure was found. Then I ended up back on the Enterprise."

Realization hit Kirk. So that's why Bones was so bitter during that whole mission. I thought there was more to his attitude than merely being angry about my promotion and Spock going to Vulcan. "Why didn't you tell me, Bones? I wouldn't have expected you to come back under those circumstances."

"Guess I was doing what I've always been so good at -- I was trying to escape again and I used you and Spock to vent my anger." McCoy paused and noted a surprised look on Kirk's face. "Yes, I know I was a monster during that whole mission. I let you think it was anything but what was really wrong. But I just couldn't talk about it. Not to you, to Spock or to anyone for that matter."

"Well, I'm glad you've finally come around to realizing you have to deal with this. You know it is bound to get worse before it gets better, but I think the results will be worth the effort." Kirk said, remembering all too well the advice the Doctor had given him so many times before.

"I know, Jim. I also know that intellectually, none of these feelings are justified. However, intellect and emotions do not go hand-in-hand, as you well know. If they did, I'd be able to make sense out of all this. I had too little time with him at the end -- I didn't have time to tell him things I wanted him to know. Intellectually, I know that the cure wouldn't have worked with my father -- he was already too far gone; however, emotionally, that logic just doesn't work."

"Well, we're just going to have to work on that. Both Spock and I have faith in you -- and neither one of us is going to give up."

"I do appreciate that, Jim. I just feel bad about imposing on you and Spock -- as you can tell from recent events, there's no way to predict how I'm going to react. I even surprised myself."

"Well, you sure surprised me. And if last night isn't going to make me give up, nothing will. My door is always open -- as is Spock's. He's really concerned about you. He just doesn't know how to tell you."

"Yeah, I sense that. He's not arguing with me over every little thing. I miss it in some ways, but the way my emotions are on edge, it is appreciated." McCoy got up to leave. "I'm going to try to eat something, then I'll be in sickbay."

"Okay, Bones. But remember, I'm here if you need me -- whenever."

"Thanks, Jim." McCoy left and headed for the officer's dining room.



Later that night, McCoy sat at his desk, drumming his fingers on the arm of the chair while he looked at the monitor in front of him. However, his thoughts were elsewhere. The nightmares were getting worse and more frequent. With Tyree on board, McCoy had more pressing concerns. I shouldn't be dealing with my problems now. McCoy thought. Right. More procrastination. You know you want -- and need -- help. You're just too damn proud to admit it... You have to keep up the facade that you're handling it. How can I impose on my friends so? How can I ask them to relive this whole mess with me? He began to regret the discussion he had had with Kirk earlier.

McCoy decided to add to his personal log -- he had decided to start keeping one some time ago, hoping that by talking -- even to no one in particular, he could help himself.

"Leonard H. McCoy: Personal Log. The nightmares about my father are getting worse. I know I have to get rid of this guilt -- but damn it, how? You'd think I'd know since I'm a supposed psychology expert. Well -- they always say that a doctor that treats himself has a fool for a patient. The nightmare I had last night was not only painful, but weird.

"I was standing in a swirling fog, and couldn't discern anything around me. Suddenly, in the distance I could barely make out a chair with someone sitting in it. I began walking toward the chair, and when I got closer I realized that it was my father. I didn't want to go any closer, but he was smiling at me, welcoming me. I continued forward and the fog disappeared. When I got next to him, his smile turned into a stern look and he said, 'Why did you kill me?' I woke up after that.

"I have to get some sleep before it starts affecting my ability to do my job -- before it affects my judgment in dealing with Tyree." He yawned widely and continued. "Jim and Spock are my closest friends -- the only friends I would be willing to discuss this with. I don't want to open up just to be hurt. I will no longer be the strong, steadfast "Doctor" that everyone turns to. I will be vulnerable to hurt and rejection. The little bit I have said to them barely scratches the surface of my feelings.

"I have to face the fact that I'm scared -- scared to let those feelings out. Scared of the pain, not to mention being afraid of what Jim -- and Spock -- will think of me. Scared of their rejection. I will no longer be the gruff, stubborn, shielded Dr. McCoy. I'm not sure I want to give that up. I'm not sure I'm strong enough to give that up.

"I also do not want them to feel sorry for me to the point they... especially Jim... stop talking to me about their problems. I've always been able to push my problems aside for someone else. If I couldn't, I wouldn't be in medicine! Jim's been through hell... and will need help. And Spock just lost a brother.

"Not to mention the fact I don't want their pity -- I've never let it get to the point where I pity myself. I'd resign from Starfleet first."

McCoy stopped recording. He was exhausted and needed sleep. He decided to try to get some rest and risk the nightmares returning. It was already 0200 hours... maybe he could get just a couple hours sleep. But, once in bed he was unable to fall asleep. After several hours of tossing and turning, McCoy decided to get up and go to the labs.

He started for the lab, but changed course. He did not want to run into anyone. Maybe his office would offer some solitude. He entered sickbay and stopped by Tyree's bed. Tyree was sleeping. His pain indicators showed little pain. The medications were helping the humanoid get some rest. At least someone is able to sleep, McCoy thought to himself. He decided he would catch up on some reports on the physicals of the new crewmembers.

Sitting at his desk, McCoy's thoughts were anywhere but on the reports in front of him. He knew the pain over his father's death was reaching the point where if something wasn't done it would affect his work, if it wasn't doing so already because of his inability to sleep. He also knew he could not let that happen. At present, he wanted to believe that he was able to separate his guilt and pain from his work. However, there was some doubt in his mind when it came to Tyree. Tyree's situation was hitting a little too close to home.

McCoy's thoughts were interrupted by a signal at the door. "May I enter, Doctor?" Spock inquired. McCoy nodded and waved him in. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

The Doctor gestured toward the reports in front of him. "Nothing that can't wait," he replied. "What can I do for you, Spock?"

The situation was difficult for the Vulcan. "After our discussion in the lab, I gave your problem some consideration. I do not mean to intrude, but I do have a suggestion." Spock hesitated, waiting for some signal from the Doctor. When McCoy did not speak, the Vulcan continued. "The Captain is on the planet. Otherwise I would have consulted him first."

McCoy knew Spock was having trouble coming to the point. The Doctor wasn't even sure he wanted to hear what Spock had to say. But then again, he needed help -- and he knew it. He picked up a stylus and absentmindedly played with it, thus not having to maintain eye contact with the Vulcan. "Go on, Spock. What is your suggestion?"

"I have created a program on the holodeck. It is called 'Doctors' Orders'. It may help you confront the source of your guilt and pain." Spock paused and realized for the

first time during their conversation, the Doctor was staring intently at the Vulcan. "I do not want you to think I am intruding on your privacy. I am only trying to be of some service."

McCoy was overwhelmed by Spock's display of concern and did not know what to say. "Yes... no... no you're not intruding," he stammered. "I just don't know what to say. Thank you, Spock. However, I was under the impression that you felt the holodeck serves no useful purpose since it is based on illusion and not reality."

The Vulcan nodded his acknowledgment. "I am not doing anything which you would not do if the roles were reversed. With regard to the holodeck, perhaps I have been hasty in my opinion. Perhaps if an illusion is created with facts, it could prove to be a useful therapeutic tool." He turned to leave. "Besides, as the Captain might say, what are friends for?" With that, Spock was gone.

McCoy shook his head in disbelief. Spock never ceased to amaze him. He tried to concentrate on the reports in front of him but was unable to do so. He decided to check on Tyree and go get something to eat. With the little sleep he was getting, he knew he had to keep up his strength somehow.

After checking on Tyree, McCoy left sickbay and entered the turbolift. He hesitated before stating his destination. "Holodeck," he directed the computer. I can eat later. I want to check this out.

Upon arriving at the holodeck, McCoy hesitated. He had rarely used the holodeck. It was a popular place for the younger crewmembers to get some recreation, but he had never really known the older crew to use it often. The Doctor never cared for fancy electronics -- nor did he trust them. However, Spock had said it might help him confront his guilt. And McCoy knew if he did not deal with it soon, he would become a basketcase. Besides, he was curious.

"Run program 'Doctors' Orders,'" McCoy snapped before he could chicken out. Entering the holodeck, he watched the transformation with a combination of feelings. Amazement at the technology... and apprehension as to what he was about to experience. In a matter of moments, the room with four bare walls was changed into a countryside setting. Green grass. Trees. Birds. And a house... his childhood home. This was Georgia -- and he was home. He could smell the freshly cut grass. The cool breeze felt good on his warm skin. He walked toward the house. It was just as he remembered it. The porch that extended the length of the house. The garden. The rocking chair his father had always sat in on evenings when the family would relax after dinner. McCoy stopped walking. His father was in that chair -- smiling at him. Beckoning him to come closer. Much like one of his nightmares, but without the fog. He ventured closer. His father was just like he remembered as a child. He stopped. He could not do this. Not now. He was afraid.

"End program," McCoy snapped. The bare room quickly reappeared, with no vestiges of what the Doctor had just experienced. He left the holodeck and headed for sickbay. "What the hell was I thinking of, going in there," McCoy said to no one in particular as he entered the lift. "And who does Spock think he is? And how did he obtain the information to run such a program?"

Upon entering sickbay, McCoy went to Tyree's bedside and sat down. He started talking, not caring whether Tyree could hear him or not. "It's such a waste. Your life could be normal with what we could do." He paused, put his head in his hands. "I didn't

want to kill my father. He asked me to do it. I would've done anything for him. Why did he ask me... "

McCoy's ramblings were interrupted by the alarms on Tyree's bed. Tyree went into respiratory arrest. McCoy called for help and proceeded to start resuscitation measures. Resuscitation was not working and the Doctor flipped on the life support controls. After a few moments, the readings returned to show stabilization. McCoy breathed a sigh of relief. Then realization set in. "What have I done? There will be hell to pay... "

The Doctor left Tyree's bedside and went to his office. He knew life support should not have been turned on. It did not occur to him that a simple solution was within reach -- to merely shut it off. "Why did I do it?" he asked. "Jim is going to have my head." The Doctor laid his head on the desk. He was exhausted.

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James Kirk did not wait for an invitation to the CMO's office. "Doctor, why is Tyree on life support?" he demanded, not noticing that McCoy was dozing at his desk.

McCoy woke suddenly. McCoy knew this confrontation was inevitable. "Jim, sit down. Life support is on because I turned it on."

"Why?" he asked. "You knew life support wasn't to be started. That was Tyree's wish."

"Look, I'm sorry. It just happened." McCoy explained. "Tyree went into respiratory failure and resuscitation was begun. As a matter of habit, I turned the life support switch on." He paused and noted that the Captain did not appear convinced. "Jim, it was a patient -- that's all I was thinking -- it's all I ever think."

"Well, then just shut it off," Kirk growled.

"It's not that easy. Once life support is turned on, there's regulations and... "

Kirk interrupted. "Isn't that convenient?" Sarcasm was evident in his voice.

"What the hell do you mean by that?" McCoy demanded.

"You've opposed me from the beginning on this. You went against a patient's wishes and my authority in an attempt to gain more time for research you know won't help." Kirk's voice became louder. "Bones, it's not Tyree you want to keep alive. It's your father."

"Dammit, Jim. That's not fair. You know me better than that," the Doctor insisted.

Kirk paced back and forth. "I thought I knew you better. If what you say is true, then why can't you just shut off the life support?"

"You know the regulations," McCoy barked. "We never got legal authorization from Tyree. Now it will require the attending physician, the CMO and the captain to authorize it."

Kirk sat down across from McCoy. "Fine, that's you and me. So let's do it."

McCoy reluctantly nodded in agreement as he located the necessary forms. He knew Kirk was right. Maybe he had turned on life support not on Tyree, but on his own father. Trying to undo a mistake made years ago. A mistake he had paid for every day of his life since then. Was it a mistake? He would never really know. But his father was still dead by his hand, and no amount of logic could ease his soul.

After the two men had signed off on the necessary forms, Kirk stood up to leave. "I assume you can take it from here, Doctor?"

"No, I need two witnesses. Chapel's in the lab and I'd prefer to not disturb her." McCoy turned to the communication link. "Locate Mr. Spock and have him report to sickbay." He switched it off. Turning back to the Captain, he said. "You have to understand something. After his life support is turned off, he may still live a while longer. There's no way to tell how long." The Doctor stood up. "I'll join you at Tyree's bedside momentarily, Captain."

Kirk left. He knew how difficult this was for his friend. But McCoy had gone against orders and Kirk was worried that the motivation for that concerned his father... not acting out of habit as McCoy insisted. Kirk fervently hoped it did not come to having to relieve his friend of duty.

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McCoy joined Kirk and Spock at Tyree's bed. As the Doctor looked from Tyree, to Kirk and Spock and back to Tyree, the Captain realized how much strain he was under. He wondered how long it had been since McCoy had had a good night's sleep.

The Doctor began making adjustments before ceasing life support. He turned to Kirk and Spock, who were standing behind him. "After life support is turned off, he may begin breathing on his own. There's no way to tell what may happen." The others nodded. McCoy turned back to the bed and reached down to pick up the life support controls. He froze. It was not Tyree on the bed -- it was his father. McCoy dropped the controls, "No, I can't do it... not again!" He pushed past Kirk and Spock and bolted from the room.

Kirk looked from Tyree to Spock. "What the hell... Let's go, Spock. We need to find him." Kirk was torn. He knew Bones was in trouble, but he also knew he had to be tough on this one.

Kirk and Spock found McCoy in the supply room in sickbay. As they approached, they noticed the confusion in the Doctor's eyes. "Why, Bones. What happened back there?"

McCoy turned a grim face toward the Captain. "I can't do it, Jim. I just can't."

Kirk hated what he was about to do. It could result in McCoy alienating himself and withdrawing into a cocoon that they might not be able to bring him out of. But he had to take the chance. "Didn't you learn anything about dying with dignity from your father?" Kirk demanded. "Tyree's life is worth nothing to him as he is now -- he deserves to die and be at peace with himself. It was his wish -- his desire. And I accepted the responsibility to make that decision for him."

Kirk's words were like a searing knife through flesh. For a moment, McCoy's expression was one of pain -- the same pain Kirk and Spock had witnessed in the observation room when Sybok had forced him to relive his memory. Glancing at Spock, McCoy turned to face the Captain. Drawing up his strength, he stated, "If you think it's so goddamned easy, you do it! I'll have no part of it." With that, McCoy turned and walked out of the room.

Silence filled sickbay after McCoy left. Kirk was angry. Bones could be so darn stubborn. For a moment, Kirk pushed his concern for Tyree aside. Forgetting he wasn't alone, he commented quietly, "I have a funny feeling I've just put my foot in my mouth."

"If I understand the interpretation of that remark correctly, I would tend to agree with you, Captain." Spock's stare did not leave the door through which McCoy had left. His concern for the Doctor was growing and, while it was just a 'hunch,' as his Captain would call it, this was not a good time for McCoy to be alone. "I think I will see if I can locate Dr. McCoy and find out whether I can be of help."

"No, Spock. Let me go... "

"No, Captain." Spock interrupted. "I believe it is best for you not to try to talk to the Doctor right now. I will attempt to find him and offer assistance. Obviously, we were correct in our conclusion that reliving the memory of ceasing life support on his father is not only as painful now as it ever was, it is now, as you might say, an open wound."

Kirk nodded his head, "Yes, and one that I've just poured salt into. I'll be on the bridge. Keep me informed." The Captain headed for the door, but stopped and turned back toward Spock. "Spock, am I wrong -- should we keep Tyree alive indefinitely, just because we have the technology to do so?"

"Captain, that is a question that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. You know that Vulcans revere life above all else. My training in logic says that as long as there is life, then there is hope. However, my experience with Captain Pike has shown me that the quality of life is more important than the quantity. This was not your personal decision, it was Tyree's. You are merely acting on his wishes. However, the Doctor has taken an oath and has very high ethical standards. His knowledge tells him we can give Tyree a full and productive life, albeit altered."

The Captain was torn. The life support had to be turned off and Kirk believed that McCoy, for his own benefit, had to be the one to do it. It was Tyree's wish. "I sure hope you're right, Spock. McCoy's got to realize we must look at this from Tyree's perspective. You go on -- make sure Bones is okay." Kirk hesitated, then added, "And thanks... from both of us."



McCoy headed directly for the one place where he knew he could be alone and think. All too often, he had used the ship's archives as a place to think out his problems. However, those problems were usually of a professional nature -- how to treat a patient or how to give someone bad news. This time he had to sort out his own feelings.

"Jim's hit below the belt before, but never this hard," he mumbled to himself as he walked down the corridor toward his destination. "He saw what happened with Sybok -- how could he use that against me?" McCoy was hurt. "Get your act together, McCoy."

You're too old to let something like this eat at you. Jim's a human being, he didn't mean to hurt you. He's only trying to do what he believes is best for Tyree." He reached the door to the ship's archives and entered, thankful that it was empty. He took his usual place in a corner, and started thinking.

Am I being selfish? Am I hesitating to allow Tyree to die because of my own reluctance? Am I afraid of making the same mistake again? But I'm right. As long as we can keep him comfortable, there's hope. But then, that's not Tyree's wish and it is not right to go against a patient's wishes.

McCoy's thoughts turned to an alternate line of thinking. Does Jim really know what Tyree wants and, if so, shouldn't I listen to him despite what I may or may not believe in personally? I can't allow how I personally feel to affect the way I treat patients. I've always been able to go by their wishes before.

McCoy knew what his problem was. He was too close to the situation and he was letting it get to him. He had never let personal problems affect the way he dealt with patients before. I think I'm losing control of my abilities to treat objectively. Doctors were supposed to be able to be empathetic without getting involved. Well, he had never been good at that. His father had always said his sensitivity was one of his greatest assets -- and his greatest weakness. He put his head down on his folded arms. What I need is some sleep, McCoy thought. I may be able to make an intelligent decision if I could get some rest.



Several hours later, McCoy was awakened by a hand on his shoulder. "What the he..." He looked up to see Spock standing at his side. "How in the hell did you find me, Spock?"

"It took me 3.4 hours to locate you. I must admit, when you want to find 'peace and quiet', you know how to find it."

"Obviously not well enough." McCoy commented dryly. "What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering the same thing," Spock answered.

The Doctor was somewhat surprised. "What do you mean, Spock?"

"As I mentioned before, I am aware that you have been under stress since Sybok caused you to 'relive' your experience with your father." The Vulcan hesitated, then continued. "I do understand your reluctance to do what the Captain asks of you. I thought you may need someone who could help you look at it objectively."

Any other time, McCoy would have some kind of sarcastic remark to make to such an offer. He had often used his sarcasm to help temper tense situations, especially between Spock and himself. However, Spock was genuinely concerned. "Spock, I do appreciate what you are offering. But right now, I don't think I can think of it objectively, or even discuss it objectively. That's probably my main problem. I've never let my personal problems affect my treatment of patients before. I feel like I'm losing control."

Spock nodded in agreement. "You must admit that these circumstances are somewhat extenuating. If a person's culture and belief prohibits you from extending

treatment, even if it is to save their life, do you, or I, have a right to disregard those desires?"

"When those beliefs are based on the lack of knowledge, then I believe we do, Spock. We are talking about the beliefs of someone -- no, the desires of someone who doesn't know enough about technology to make an intelligent decision."

"I see your point, Doctor. But you must also remember that this person who 'doesn't know enough to make an intelligent decision' turned over that power to Captain Kirk. You are now questioning his ability to make that decision."

McCoy looked at the floor, then back to Spock. "Then you think I'm wrong not to shut off life support, even when I believe there is a chance."

"No, Doctor, you misunderstand me. In principle, I support your passion for saving life. I merely am attempting to point out that, in this case, it is not your decision to make. However, I do not believe you can accept that until you come to terms with what you are feeling about your father's death. That obviously pains you more than you would care to admit."

"Unfortunately, Spock, I don't have time for that now. I have a decision to make." McCoy stood and headed for the door, stopping just short and turning back to look at his friend, "Thanks, Spock."

Before the Vulcan could reply the Doctor was gone.



Kirk was impatient. It had been several hours since Spock had gone to find McCoy. He tried to call Spock in his quarters, but there was no answer. He decided to go try to find him.

The first place he went was sickbay. Tyree was sound asleep. A few technicians were working. "Anyone seen Doctor McCoy?" he asked of no one in particular.

One of the technicians looked up. "No, Sir. He hasn't been here for several hours. Is there any message, Sir?"

"Not, that's okay." Kirk turned and left. After almost an hour searching, he could find no sign of either Spock or McCoy. He decided to go back to his quarters. He did, however, stop at Spock's quarters to leave a message to check in with him before he went to bed.



Before going to the bridge the next morning, Spock stopped at the Captain's quarters and signalled for entry.

"Come in," the familiar voice responded.

The Vulcan entered Kirk's cabin, where the Human was sitting preoccupied at his computer. "Captain, may I have a word with you?" he asked.

Kirk nodded. "Sure, Spock. What happened last night? Did you find Bones?"

The Vulcan was unsure how to approach the topic. "First, I apologize for not seeing you last evening... However I got in quite late and felt you needed your sleep. I did locate the Doctor last evening."

"How is he? I guess he's still mad at me."

"The subject of his anger did not come up. However, he assured me that he is able to separate his feelings about his father from his judgment regarding Tyree." Spock replied. "He claims that he is too old to allow 'a silly emotion such as guilt' to affect his thought processes," the Vulcan continued, paraphrasing McCoy's words in an earlier discussion.

Kirk shook his head in frustration. "He, of all people, should know that strong emotions, be they good or bad, are not restricted to a specific age group," the Human commented. "What do you think, Spock?"

The Vulcan rubbed his hands together. "I believe that Dr. McCoy believes it. And he wishes you and I to believe it as well."

"I don't know, Spock. Do you believe him?" Kirk asked.

Spock ignored the question. "I had also spoken to Dr. McCoy earlier in his office. I informed him at that time that I have created a program on the holodeck that may help him face his past.

"Oh? I thought you did not approve of the use of the holodeck," Kirk commented. "What gave you the idea?"

"Captain... Jim. I do not fully understand the scope of Human emotions. However, it is apparent that the Doctor is under a great deal of stress." Spock shifted uneasily on his feet. "I merely thought it might help. Perhaps it could be therapeutic, much like hypnosis used to be. Possibly facing the source of his guilt would help him deal with it."

"That was very thoughtful of you, Spock." Kirk saw the slight shrug to indicate Spock did not think he had done anything of significance.

Kirk stood and paced the floor. "Being Human does not necessarily mean a person understands emotions," he said in frustration. "I don't know what to do. I can't help Bones unless he lets me try. He's got to admit he needs help first. And getting him to admit that is going to be difficult. He's so unpredictable right now. First he won't talk, then he will. Now he's shut himself off from us again." Kirk shook his head. "And I haven't been that supportive either."

"I understand that, Captain." Spock said. "The Doctor has always been available to listen to others' problems. However, he has always been reluctant to share his own emotions."

The Captain smiled at his friends' observation. "That's right. On more than one occasion, I've been the person that has turned to him," he said, glancing at Spock. "Especially in recent events when I thought I had lost you." He paused, remembering the

pain of that experience. "I'm afraid I am going to have to use some of his own techniques."

An arched eyebrow appeared on the Vulcan's face. "To what techniques are you referring?"

"Well, trickery and manipulation to name a couple. But it may get rough. Wish I had paid more attention in the few psych classes I took," the Captain replied. "Guess I'm going to have to play this dirty to get through to him. He has to talk about it -- or it will eat him up inside."

Spock fought the urge to inquire about the meaning of the last statement. "I must go to the bridge. However, if there is any way I can be of service, let me know." The Vulcan signalled the door to open and left.

Kirk turned back to his computer, wondering what he would do next.



McCoy sat alone next to Tyree's bed where he had been all morning. He was wrestling with his emotions. The Humanoid lying on the bed trusted them, and the Doctor knew that by turning on the life support, he had betrayed Tyree's trust and caused a rift between himself and Jim. He knew what the right thing to do was.

Not knowing -- or caring -- if Tyree could hear his words, he began talking. "Tyree, I'm sorry. I've been trying to fool myself -- along with the Captain and Spock -- into believing I was able to deal with this unemotionally. Hell, when have I ever been able to be unemotional about a patient? And now, with the raw hurt I feel inside -- and the inability to talk about it -- I guess I was trying to make up for past mistakes."

The Doctor became quiet. He thought of his father -- then Tyree. "The Hippocratic Oath tells me not to do harm. Over the years there have been many arguments over the interpretation of that oath when discussing euthanasia or the decision not to start life support. I guess on different worlds, there are different interpretations." McCoy was allowing his intellect and emotions fight this out. He hoped that, as in the past, intellect would win. This was an awfully painful area. "But there is only one meaning in my mind, and I betrayed my own beliefs when I let dad die. I broke my oath because my father asked me to." McCoy shook his head. "He had no right to ask that of me. No right! But he did, and I couldn't refuse him... just as I can't refuse you. Please forgive me." The Doctor reached over and shut down life support. He ignored the regulations requiring witnesses. He did not care. He had to act before his emotions took control over his actions again.

Unlike his father, Tyree did not die immediately. In a small way, that pleased the Doctor. He put his head down on the bed and dozed off to sleep.



"Dr. McCoy."

The Doctor fought the unfamiliar voice. He needed sleep and did not want to be disturbed.

"Dr. McCoy."

The voice was louder. McCoy was aware of a tenseness in the back of his neck. He tried to ignore it. He was enjoying sleep, uninterrupted by nightmares. A hand touched him on the shoulder.

"Please, Dr. McCoy. Wake up."

McCoy started. "Tyree!" He sat up quickly, ignoring the twinge of pain in his back and neck from sleeping in such an awkward position. He wondered how long he had been asleep. He laid a hand on the Humanoid's. "Tyree. How are you feeling?"

Tyree's voice was quiet. "Very weak. However your treatments are relieving much of the pain. I thank you for your kindness."

The Doctor didn't know what to say. He stood up but stayed close to the bed. "I have to apologize. I did something that you should know about." McCoy told the Humanoid of his actions and the life support being turned on. Also, his difficulty in shutting it back off. "I guess you could call me stubborn," the Human finished with a rueful smile.

"No, McCoy, you are a very generous and sensitive man. My people could learn much from you. You see imperfection as a challenge -- something to be overcome." Tyree paused to take a deep breath. "My people see imperfection as a weakness that must be removed before it can do harm. Maybe one day..." He was interrupted by a spasm of pain in his chest. "I will die soon, Dr. McCoy. I do not wish to die alone."

"And you won't. Someone will be here with you at all times." McCoy promised as he laid a hand on Tyree's shoulder. "You go to sleep now. I'll be here. And... thank you."

Tyree did not have the strength to ask why McCoy was thanking him. That was okay. The Doctor knew he probably would not be able to explain it. Technology had become so complex and so advanced that the thought of allowing someone to die naturally seemed out of the ordinary.

McCoy sat back down, watching the Humanoid as he slept peacefully and awaited what was to come.



That evening, Leonard McCoy knew he had to talk to Jim -- to once again apologize. He left Dr. Chapel with Tyree and headed for Kirk's quarters. He knew the Captain had been working on his reports regarding the progress on Neural.

Before going to see the Captain, the Doctor stopped by the Botanical gardens. This was Sulu's pride and joy, and it reminded McCoy of home. Trees. Flowers. The fresh smell of warm air condensing on the various plant life. He had not been here for some time. A young couple sat under a tree talking. They did not notice him. His surroundings reminded him that life goes on. Life grows... flowers die to sow the seeds of future generations. It was a pleasant thought, and he needed pleasant thoughts right now.

For the first time, McCoy felt good. It was time for him to bury the guilt he had felt for so long. The pain over the loss of his father was something he could live with. Guilt, on the other hand, was such a destructive emotion. It served no useful purpose.

McCoy left to see the Captain -- something he was not entirely prepared for. As he walked through the corridors his thoughts went to his father. Was his guilt really because of stopping life support? Or was it something else? He stopped at the door to Kirk's cabin and signalled for entrance. He heard a muffled "come in" and entered.

McCoy entered to see Spock and Kirk involved in a chess game. Spock, as usual, appeared exasperated at the Captain's 'illogical' strategy. However, the Doctor did not miss a quick glance from Kirk to Spock, then back to himself. He had probably been the topic of their conversation.

"I can come back later, Jim." McCoy made a move toward the door.

"No, Bones. Please stay," the Captain said. "I think I've frustrated Spock enough for one day with my 'inefficient play'."

Spock reacted to the Captain's statement with an arched eyebrow. "I must be leaving anyway. Dr. Chapel is expecting me in the lab." He stood and tugged at his uniform jacket.

"No, Spock," McCoy interrupted. "Christine is with Tyree. I'd like you to stay. I have something to tell the both of you. I know the Captain is going to beam down to the planet in the morning and I have to say something."

Spock sat down. Kirk picked up a chess piece and fingered it absentmindedly. "What is it, Bones? Is there something wrong with Tyree?" the Captain asked, knowing what the answer was going to be.

McCoy walked over to Kirk's bed and turned to face his two friends. "No, that's not it. I've turned off the life support. Tyree is still alive and is resting comfortably. I've put a 24-hour watch on him because he requested not to be left alone." If Kirk was going to react, McCoy did not give him the time. "I have to apologize again. I haven't been the best person to have around lately."

Kirk spared a glance toward Spock, then back to McCoy. "Look, Bones. I'm no psychologist, but you've been through hell. Sybok really did a number on you."

"Yes, he did," the Doctor agreed. "But I'm old enough... and wise enough... to not allow guilt to affect my judgment."

"Now, just a minute," the Captain demanded. "How many times have you told me that guilt does not know age -- it can attack anyone, anytime! And it's facing the source of that guilt that is the first step to ridding yourself of it."

"Well, Jim-boy, I guess you've learned something from all those lectures I've given you," the Doctor commented, a small grin showing on his face. "Both of you have been trying to help me and I've done nothing but lash out at you and walk away. After my father died, I thought I could deal with it on my own. Nightmares started, then went away a couple years after it happened." McCoy paused and sat down. "I felt by not telling you about it would let me bury the pain. Which I did... until Sybok..."

"Until Sybok dredged it up again in front of us," Kirk completed the statement. "But, we're your friends. We would have listened... and helped if we could."

The Doctor nodded. "I know. I've never been good at talking about my problems. Guess I feel my problems aren't worth discussing. I would much rather do the listening."

Kirk sat back in his chair. "That's a situation we'll have to remedy. Everyone needs someone to talk to." Noticing Spock's nod in agreement, he added. "But now, we have to deal with your feelings about your father's death... the guilt you feel because of the cure that was found so soon after you shut off life support."

Spock had remained quiet, not wanting to intrude on what appeared to be a healthy discussion for the Doctor. "Doctor, may I suggest that the guilt you are experiencing is not caused by the cure, nor is it caused by the cessation of life support at your own hands?"

Kirk saw McCoy break eye contact. He looked down at his hands. Sensing Spock had hit on something. Kirk asked, "Spock, what do you mean? You saw what Sybok did..." The Captain turned to McCoy. "Bones... is there something else? Something you haven't told us?"

McCoy looked up, his gaze distant and far away. "Spock, for a Vulcan, you'd make a hell of a psychologist." To Kirk, he added, "I'd accepted long ago that what I did was right. I knew it. No, my guilt lies in other areas."

Kirk stood up to prepare a drink for himself and the Doctor. He handed one to McCoy. "Like what, Bones? Please, you can talk to us."

The Doctor looked at Spock as he accepted the drink. "I ran your holodeck program. I didn't stay... I couldn't. I was angry because I felt you had no right to bring back those memories."

"That thought did occur to me, Doctor. And I apologize," the Vulcan commented. "However, you said you were angry. Has something changed that feeling?"

"Yeah. Me. I've done a lot of soul searching. I was afraid to tell you..." McCoy glanced back and forth between Spock and Kirk, "that I needed help. When the nightmares started up again and kept me from getting any sleep, I knew it would only be a matter of time before you found out I'm not as strong as I appear."

Kirk was relieved that McCoy was finally opening up. "Bones, everyone needs to lean on a friend sometimes. As many times as I've used you, do you think me any less a person?"

"Well, no. But that's different..."

The Captain shook his head. "Why? Because you're a doctor and, therefore, not supposed to feel? Come on, you don't believe that. You're a human being -- subject to all the emotions -- good and bad -- that anyone else can fall victim to."

The room grew silent. Kirk and McCoy sipped their drinks. Spock looked around the room as though searching for an answer. Kirk knew they were close... what was it going to take?

The Captain was the first to break the silence. "Bones, you said your guilt comes from something else. Did Spock's holodeck program have something to do with it?"

McCoy stood and paced the room, rattling the ice in his glass. "Yes and no. I knew where the guilt was coming from for some time -- after I realized I didn't feel guilty over my decision to stop dad's life support." He paused and glanced toward Spock. "The holodeck program was going to make me face it. That's why I didn't go through with it. That's why I was angry at Spock." He forced a grin. "But, he was right."

Kirk still did not understand. "Bones, I'm sorry. But I still don't see it."

The Doctor looked around the room. "The guilt came from how I treated my father before he was on his deathbed. I could never tell him that I cared for him. It seemed all I ever did was make him unhappy. We argued constantly -- about my career choice. About Starfleet. He used to say I was running away. What he never knew is that I had found happiness... and friends." He looked at Kirk and Spock, the emotion evident in his eyes. "I never talked about my friends or the ship. I let him down." He sat his glass on the table. "I never told him that I loved him -- not even when he was on his deathbed. That's not how it should have been." He sat down on the end of Kirk's bed.

Neither Human noticed Spock get up and leave the room. While he was concerned for the Doctor, he felt Kirk might make more progress without him. The highly emotional atmosphere was making him feel uncomfortable and while he wanted to lend his support, he knew his awkwardness might hinder the progress the Captain was making.

Kirk went over and sat down beside McCoy. "Bones, we all say things to family -- and friends -- that we wish we could take back." He thought about recent comments he himself had made to the man sitting next to him. "More often than not, we forget to tell people what they mean to us... especially those that we care about the most."

When McCoy looked at Kirk, the Captain realized the drain the situation had had on his friend. His eyes were bloodshot and appeared sunken. There were lines of exhaustion permeating the Doctor's features. Kirk continued, "Relationships with friends or family that we feel comfortable in are the ones we abuse the most. We're quick to take advantage of it... to say things that will hurt... but all too often forget to say what we really feel."

"You're right. I know that." McCoy sounded desperate. "But when I think of dad, all I think of are the times I treated him like shit... The fights. The hurting. I couldn't even hug him... "

"Bones, stop," Kirk interrupted. "What about the good times? Try to remember them. Don't concentrate on the bad memories."

"That's easier said than done. Oh, there were good times and if I dig deep enough, I can find them. But the bad memories seem to be all I can easily remember. They permeate my thoughts." McCoy put his head in his hands and gently wept for what might have been. For what was lost to him forever. "I loved him, Jim, but... " Tears flowed freely as McCoy choked on his words. "It's too late. We never talked about the good times. We were always too busy arguing. Now I can't go back."

Kirk gently put an arm around his friend's shoulder and felt the tense anguish in McCoy's back. With quiet pressure, he pulled his friend towards him.

McCoy responded immediately. He clutched to Kirk like a man grasping a lifeline and wept into Jim's chest. He found comfort there. He had missed this feeling with his family and longed for the ability to comfortably reach out to people. But he had always



been afraid of being rejected, and had denied himself this one simple pleasure for fear of rejection. But the comfort gave him renewed strength. Slowly, the Doctor pulled away from Jim and wiped the tears from his face. "Thanks" was all he could choke out. Taking a deep breath, McCoy smiled. "Now all I need is a good night's sleep."

Kirk decided sleep would do his friend more good than more talking. "Bones, why don't you try. You can sleep right here in my quarters. If the nightmares come back, I'll be here. Okay?"

"Well, okay." Kirk stood up to let McCoy lie down on his bed. "Jim, there's no need for you to stay if you have something you need to do," the Doctor said as he stretched out on the Captain's bed. Silently he hoped Kirk would stay. Just before he dropped off to sleep, he looked up at his Captain. "Thanks Jim... for everything."

Kirk sat down at his desk. "You're welcome, Bones. Now get some sleep... captain's orders!" McCoy was asleep before he heard Kirk's directive.

S

McCoy woke, more refreshed than he had been in days. For a moment, he was disoriented, then he realized where he was. Blessedly, there had been no nightmares. He pushed himself up on one elbow.

"It's about time you woke up," Kirk said as McCoy swung his legs over the side of the bed.

The Doctor looked at the chronometer by Kirk's bedside. "0900 hours!" McCoy exclaimed. "I have to get to Tyree."

"That's okay. Don't be in such a rush," Kirk stood up and stretched the kinks out of his back. "Christine and Spock took turns with him through the night. You can relieve Spock after you've had a good breakfast."

Remembering the events of the evening before, McCoy suddenly felt self-conscious and he wanted to leave. "No, that's okay. I really should get down there." He reached the door before Kirk reacted.

"Look, about last night... if you want to stop by later and discuss this more... " Jim said as the Doctor signalled for the door to open.

McCoy paused. "Thanks for last night. I think it really helped." Then he remembered Kirk was going down to the planet. "I'll be in sickbay. Let me know how things go with the negotiations." The Doctor turned and left.

McCoy entered sickbay and went directly to Tyree's bedside. Spock stood up as the Doctor entered. "How has he been, Spock?"

The fact that the Doctor appeared more rested did not escape Spock's observation. "He has been resting. He had a period of difficult breathing a short time ago, but it passed. Now that you are here, I will accompany the Captain down to Neural."

The Doctor exchanged places with the Vulcan. As McCoy sat down next to Tyree, he said, "Spock. Thank you, for last night... for everything."

The Vulcan nodded, saying nothing. Then he turned and left McCoy to his vigil.

The Doctor studied the readings on the monitor. Tyree's vital signs were erratic. McCoy felt it would not be long before Tyree would finally be at peace. "You may not have much in the way of a formal education, but you taught me something. Your people appreciate each other while they are alive, and therefore, you accept death more easily. It's too bad our culture can't do the same."

Moments later, the alarms sounded, signaling respiratory arrest. McCoy pulled the chair up closer and took Tyree's hand in his. Except for a few gasps for breath, Tyree's death was mercifully quick. McCoy, noted the time of death — 0950 hours. He then put his head down, holding onto Tyree's hand, and wept. He mourned not for Tyree, but for his father. For what he had been denied. As the tears came, they washed away some of the guilt McCoy had carried around for so long.

A short time later, Kirk burst into sickbay, followed by Spock. "Bones... Tyree..." He stopped short as the Doctor's tear-stained face met his. Words were not needed. Tyree was dead. He would never know the negotiations had been completed. Neural would become a member of the Federation.



Kirk, Spock and McCoy returned to the ship after taking the body of Tyree home to his people. The service had been brief and honorable and was attended by both hill people and villagers.

The mood was somber. In the light of successful negotiations, a good man had died. But he would be remembered with honor.

McCoy, however, knew he had one task left to him. As the three officers left the transporter room, the Doctor stopped. "Jim. Spock. I would like to ask a favor of you."

The Captain and Science Officer exchanged glances. Kirk faced the Doctor. "What is it, Bones?"

"I would like you both to meet me at the holodeck in two hours," McCoy stated. "That is, if you can."

Spock was the first to reply. "I will be there, Doctor. For now, I will be in the science lab until then should either of you need me." He left.

Kirk and McCoy watched the disappearing figure. The Captain, turning to McCoy, said, "I'll be there too, Bones. What..."

"No questions now," McCoy interrupted. "I know you have reports to file regarding the negotiations. I'll see you in two hours." With that, the Doctor headed in the opposite direction, and left Kirk standing in the hall.



Leonard McCoy arrived at the holodeck to find Kirk and Spock already there. "I see everyone is prompt," he commented. "Not that I'd expect anything less from Spock." He ignored the arched eyebrow and the sidelong glance exchanged between the two of them.

"Listen. Before I tell you why I asked you to meet me here, I'd like to say something. I know I've been pretty difficult lately." He waved off Kirk when the Captain tried to interrupt. "I know it's true. But I want you both to know I do appreciate your patience and what you've done the past several days. I don't really know how to say thank you..." His voice drifted. He was really at a loss for words. "Damn, I've never been good at this."

Kirk empathized with his friend. He had been in the same situation many times with the roles reversed. "Bones, I think Spock and I know what you are trying to say, right, Spock?" Spock who nodded in agreement. "What you can do for us is remember we're both here. A friendship is much like a marriage... in some ways better. You're on your way to dealing with this... don't hesitate to seek us out."

McCoy was overcome with emotion. "Let's get on with this. The last time I ran this program, I ran away. I couldn't face what was there." He glanced toward Spock. "I think I'm ready now, but I'd like you both to join me." He signalled the door to open and they entered. "Computer, run 'Doctors's Orders'," he quipped, then added, "Spock, you chose quite an appropriate name for this program."

The room was again transformed. This time, McCoy thought, it seemed more beautiful than before. The fields were rich with green grass and flowers. The sky was blue, untouched by civilization's pollution. Birds were singing and the sun was bright. The cool breeze carried the scent of freshly mown grass, along with wild flowers.

Kirk took a deep breath. "This is beautiful. I don't use the holodeck much, but it never ceases to amaze me how real everything appears to be."

Even Spock was impressed. "This is quite beautiful. I do not use the holodeck; however, after seeing the results of this program, I can understand why it is popular."

McCoy looked at the Vulcan. "Didn't you see this when you developed the program?"

"No, Doctor," the Vulcan answered. "I had the computer develop the program by cross-referencing your personal files. I never observed it myself. That would have been an invasion of your privacy."

McCoy mentally apologized for his previous anger. He should have known. His attention was drawn toward a house in the distance. McCoy began toward it and Kirk and Spock followed. The Doctor was a bit apprehensive, but felt more in control this time. He was prepared for what he was about to face. It was there. The house. The porch. The chair. And his father. His dad was smiling, looking right at him. McCoy paused to take a deep breath, but continued on.

When the three of them arrived at the base of the porch, McCoy stole a fleeting glance toward his two friends. His father stood as the Doctor took the few steps up onto the porch.

"Hi, Leonard. What's brought you home?" his father asked.

The Doctor grinned and turned to Kirk and Spock. "Come on up here." Then, turning to his father, he said, "Just a visit, Dad. To see how you are doing. And," he motioned to Kirk and Spock, "to introduce you to my two best friends, Captain James Kirk, and our ship's Science Officer, Mr. Spock."

McCoy's father extended his hand in greeting. "It's nice to meet both of you. Len's written home a lot about you." McCoy watched as the three men exchanged handshakes. "Come on up here and sit down."

Kirk and Spock accepted the offer. As they took their places, Spock stated, "Sir, thank you for your hospitality. We have been told a lot about you as well. Your son is a good man... and an extremely competent physician."

McCoy's father looked at his son. "Yes, I know. He's always wanted to be a doctor. I can remember when he was young I would challenge him on that issue," he commented as he winked at the CMO. "I wanted to be sure he was becoming a doctor for the right reasons... not just because I was a doctor."

Kirk smiled inwardly, remembering the conversation he and McCoy had had about his career choice. "He's the best damn physician in Starfleet and we feel lucky to have him aboard the Enterprise."

After several minutes of reminiscing, Spock motioned to Kirk that they should leave. The Captain nodded in agreement. "Spock and I really must be going. Bones... stay as long as you want." Before McCoy could protest, the Captain and Science Officer started off in the direction from which they had come.

From the distance they could hear the laughter of father and son talking about the past. Memories... good memories of family outings, important events and love.

When Kirk and Spock were out of range of hearing, Spock inquired, "Captain, do you think that such an illusion will be enough to help the Doctor?"

Kirk gazed thoughtfully in the distance. "If the illusion is real enough to bring those good memories up front -- and therefore push back the bad memories that Bones has been so obsessed with, I think so." He paused and grinned. "This holodeck program is a wonderful idea. Maybe we should begin calling you Doctor Spock."

Spock was working on an indignant reply, however he noticed the wide grin on the Captain's face.

They left the holodeck, knowing that their friend was well on the road to recovery from the pain he had endured for so long.



*Though death may end a life --
it doesn't end a relationship --
one which struggles on in the
survivor's mind to find a reso-
lution that may never be found.*



- Unknown



COURT-MARTIAL



By: Laurel Ridener & Lynn Syck

The muted thrumming of the Enterprise beneath my feet does nothing to dispel the sour taste in my mouth or end the bitterness eating away at my heart.

I sit here in my darkened office, the softly glowing terminal patiently awaiting my final entry. The screen is filled with the standard resignation form -- somehow, it seems that the illustrious career of one Captain James T. Kirk would deserve more than a standard form -- but I haven't been able to bring myself to put my sense of betrayal into words. It needs only my personal compcode and the press of a transmission stud to become fact.

The Standard Resignation Form. 23-4144. Revised.

No different from the dozens of others I've signed over the years, except this time it's my name at the top and not some space-shy ensign's.

Friends, gentlemen, Captains all, Finney called us. Those "friends and gentlemen" have managed to accomplish what all the Klingons and Romulans and Harry Mudds in the galaxy could not -- force me to resign.

Like the invisible bite of the Vulcan sandbat, their eager acceptance of my guilt in the "murder" of Ben Finney has left an invisible wound festering in my soul, a wound that has eaten away at my very existence until everything I believed in seems tainted, questionable.

Even in my deepest dreams, I still see their accusing eyes, unable to meet my stare, darting away in shame. I still hear their accusing words, knowing it's useless to proclaim my innocence. I still see them shift away from me as if I'm unclean. These gentlemen, these captains all, have already tried, convicted, and condemned me to a hell without stars. Commodore Stone offered a ground assignment if I'd plead stress, worse if I didn't. He never once said he believed in me.

The bile in my throat rises, the tightness in my chest turns to near-pain. Is this what Starfleet is all about? Is this where all the pretty words and fancy promises will some day lead? Will I eventually sit in a bar on some star base and hang an innocent man with a rope I helped weave? I've had a glimpse beneath the glittering facade into the cannibalistic heart of Starfleet and it sickens me.

The softly pulsing screen waits patiently, a safe haven for my harried mind. It does not make any demands, it does not voice any unspoken accusations.

I hear the door to my cabin open and I know only you would come in unannounced. I can tell by the set of your Vulcan face that you know all is not well in the Captain's cabin.

I reach out and dim the terminal, not wanting you to see the contents of the screen.

You sit down across from me, as you have so many other evenings, with nothing more on your logical mind than a good game of chess. But this time I see concern. For a Vulcan, you have one of the most expressive faces I have ever seen.

"Captain," you begin softly, and I lean forward to catch your words. "You are distressed."

I can't stop the bitter chuckle that escapes my throat. "You do have a gift for understatement." I ease back in my chair, forcing myself to relax, afraid you'll see too much. But with the supple grace of the desert cat, you lean forward, brighten the terminal screen and instantly know its contents.

I take a quick breath and grit my teeth, preparing to resist the oncoming barrage of perfectly logical arguments about why I should not resign simply because I've had my feelings hurt. Possibly, you will talk me out of it this time, but the wound will still be there, the invisible bite will still fester, only to erupt again someday.

You look at me, those dark, dark eyes boring into my soul, asking me to let you help. I find my breath catching painfully in my throat.

You dim the screen, sit back down in your chair, and once again steeple your fingers before you.

"Permit me to accompany you."

Simple.

Elegant.

You would die for me and suddenly I know this.

"What?" is all I can manage.

You remain perfectly still, yet your whole body reaches for me.

"Jim, let me go with you?"

"Why?" I demand, surprised I can speak at all.

"My place is by your side. Where is immaterial."

"But, Spock... " I argue, shocked that I'm throwing away the greatest gift ever offered to me. "You could be her next Captain. There'd be nothing stopping you from being the first Vulcan in the Admiralty. Think!"

Your brows rise and your eyes sparkle. There is the tiniest hint of a smile on your lips. "I do not need to 'think,'" you answer, "to know that the hammer has fallen... to know my place is with you."

I find myself truly speechless for perhaps the first time in my life. I am awed by your willingness to give up everything you have struggled and fought so hard for just to follow me into some hypothetical wilderness. I cannot accept -- and yet, I cannot not accept. I am nothing without you. I realize this now, and with that realization, the bitterness in my heart vanishes, the opinions voiced on Star Base 12 have suddenly grown totally irrelevant. They don't matter to me.

You do.

Very much. And one day I'll tell you.

But for now, I can put your heart at ease. I press the delete stud without bothering to bring the terminal to full brightness, shutting the damned thing off. I shrug, and smile.

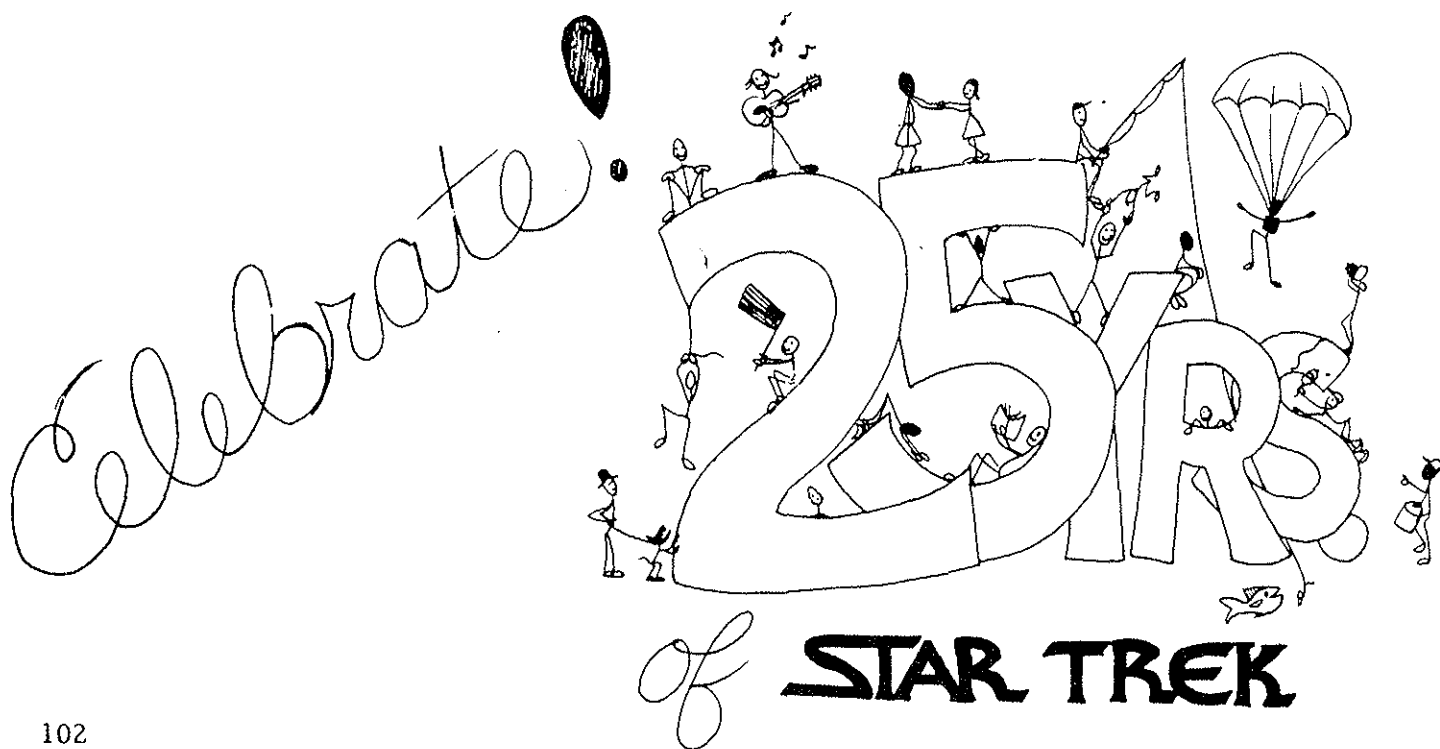
"Never mind, Spock. It was a bad idea anyway. Chess?"

Of course you nod, never smiling, but I understand perfectly well the contentment that washes over your Vulcan face.

"Certainly, Captain... one level or three?"

I feel myself grinning, laughing, soaring as high as my Enterprise.

It's going to be one hell of a good game.



Journey of a

Soul

By: Marian Kelly
Art by: Suzan Lovett



It was beginning. All the years of waiting and searching were over. The Companion was chosen and chosen well — the sleeping mind probed long after darkfall when there was no resistance. With its quest ended a sense of excitement pervaded its very essence. Tomorrow the long journey would begin... never to end.

It experienced only a moment's doubt. Surely, the fragile Terran would survive the joining — but what if he did not? It was unthinkable that another thousand-year search might be required. Still — the risk must be taken, Terrans such as this one were rare, indeed. It must succeed, for then nothing again would ever harm the sleeper, ever cause him pain or sorrow. It was MORS: that was the LAW.

"Captain Kirk?"

James Kirk stirred slowly, trying to rise from several layers of much-needed sleep. Had he actually heard his name, or had that been part of the disturbing, shadowy dream? He lay still for a moment, mind still resistant to the idea that his rest was over.

"Captain Kirk?"

This time the faint tapping was insistent, and Kirk knew there was no escaping its call. He recognized the voice: M'Benga's, and that was enough to bring him to full alert. The duty roster had listed Pendleton as being on call. So, why would M'Benga be trying to rouse him -- not for social reasons at this time of night -- unless there was an emergency? Tossing back the covers, Kirk padded over to push the release lock.

"Come in," he said, hastily throwing on a robe and pulling up the rumpled spread.

The cabin door slid open to reveal the African, red-eyed and grim-faced. To Kirk he looked as if he had not slept for a week. His next thought was that of all his crew, he probably saw less of M'Benga than anyone. As the physician stepped into the room he glanced back over his shoulder as if to reassure himself that no one was following him.

"What is it?" asked Kirk, thoroughly puzzled by the man's behavior. "Here, sit down." He pulled out a chair.

"I'll stand, sir, thank you." M'Benga was rigidly erect, a dark statue in the dimly-lit cabin.

Experiencing a flash of irritation, Kirk began, "What's so important it won't keep until morning? Has there been some sort of accident?" Instinct told him that was not the case... but, on occasion his instinct had failed him.

Suddenly, another idea made his scalp crawl. There might be a better reason for this predawn visit... McCoy. "Has something happened to Bones? Is that why you're here?" Sensing he was on the right trail, he skirted the edge of his desk, coming to stand directly in front of the Doctor.

The dark eyes met his, the expression in them one of acknowledgment and terrible pain. "Yes, sir. There was no other time to tell you." M'Benga's head bowed slightly. "I've rehearsed this for hours, and I still don't know where to begin."

"Just spit it out! Then we can talk about whatever it is." But he knew the reassurance fell on deaf ears. Kirk felt his throat muscles flitter and tighten. He was suddenly very, very, wide-awake.

Sweat glistened at the physician's scalp line as if he had just finished a race. Even his stance was wary -- warding off some intense physical invasion. "Captain, this... is very difficult for me."

Alarmed now, Kirk set his hand on M'Benga's arm. "Easy, there's no emergency, is there? Just catch your breath." He knew, however, that it was his own breath that needed catching.

His concern seemed to be the stimulant the Doctor needed, for he drew himself to his full height and met Kirk's stare. "Do you remember last month when we went to Honathus Five in order to wipe out that minor epidemic of amoebic dysentery?"

Of course, Kirk remembered. Half his crew had come down with mild forms of the damned disease. "Yes, but what does that have to do with Bones? As I recall, he didn't get sick."

The other man nodded, face still wearing the bleak look. "No, not with the dysentery. However, he did come down with a slight fever, and mentioned it to no one but me. After a few days it disappeared as suddenly as it came."

Kirk thought he knew where M'Benga was heading. "And now it's returned and he's down again. Can't you treat it the same way?" His thoughts wandered, maybe there was still time for a few more minutes of sleep.

The glance that met his contained something chilling, dispelling Kirk's hope that whatever was wrong was a minor problem. He should have known -- M'Benga was not an alarmist.

"No, sir. I can't treat it -- I did nothing the first time." His tone was that of the scientist trying to explain to the layman. "I ran tests, of course, and they all came back negative. Blood titers... all negative. Anyway, Len bounced back so fast, felt so well

that nobody had any suspicions that something was wrong." M'Benga's glance fell on the proffered chair and he sat down rather suddenly, as if pushed by an unseen hand. "Perhaps that was the one thing that was suspicious."

Kirk knew something was missing... something that M'Benga had yet to tell him. But Bones could not be very ill, he had left the man only hours before, laughing over some dumb thing an ensign had done. "I talked to him only a few hours ago. He said he was feeling great. Yet you feel the need to wait until now -- this late -- to tell me about him. What's wrong?"

He moved closer to the Doctor, trying to ignore the frisson that crept along his spine. "That's it, isn't it? You think that something's very wrong, don't you?" He fought the urge to grab his visitor and shake him by the shoulders.

M'Benga sighed, then met Kirk's worried gaze. "I've reason to suspect that Leonard McCoy has been infected with -- by -- MORS ETERNUS."

Had the words come from across the galaxy. Had they suddenly been burned or written on his hand, Kirk could not have been more astonished. "But that's impossible," he murmured. "I thought MORS was a disease of deep space... no, that's impossible!"

There was suddenly a great need in him, and he crossed the room without saying anything more, to punch the intercom. "This is the Captain. Locate Mr. Spock and send him to my quarters on the double. Kirk out."

Turning, he watched the African out of the corner of his eye, then went abruptly to his closet for a uniform, feeling that without it he was -- for some reason -- far more vulnerable. But as he untied the belt on his robe, he felt an unbearable ache begin. The garment had been a present from Bones. He could still see the flash of mischief in the eyes: **Just think of all the hours you'll save, Jim, when it counts. Beats shedding pajamas all to hell!** He ran fumbling fingers over the soft wool... had it really been two years ago? With exaggerated care he hung it up, swiftly donning his uniform, then rejoined M'Benga. The physician barely noticed him, staring off into space, seeing God knew what. Kirk shook his head; why was it that the fabled bearer of bad news always seemed to feel guilty? He sat down next to him and together they waited for the Vulcan.

A few moments later there was a quiet knock, and Kirk went quickly to the door. As he let Spock in he caught the look of near-surprise on his face when he spotted the Doctor. It was immediately smoothed away.

"Sorry to summon you, Mr. Spock, but I want you to hear M'Benga's report." He gestured toward the somber figure who had risen when the science officer entered the cabin.

"Captain. Doctor." Spock acknowledged their presence without further comment, merely stood, quietly lending his strength to his friend.

Kirk glanced at him, then said, "Let's all sit down, please." For the life of him he didn't want to hear the rest of M'Benga's report, in fact all he really wanted to do was to go to Bones and get the man to tell him this was all some hideous mistake. If this diagnosis was true then all their lives were suddenly changed.

"Captain?" Spock's gentle prompting brought him back to his quarters -- and reality. He stared hard at each man, assessing their strengths, wondering what would be

required of them later on. "I apologize, gentlemen. Please, Doctor, continue." He felt no need for such amenities as a drink. That would come later... when he was alone.

This time M'Benga looked directly at Spock, his own face as impassive as the Vulcan's. "I have just informed the Captain that Doctor McCoy has fallen victim to MORS," he said quietly. Then, glancing away, "I have to admit that I've reached this diagnosis purely by my observations of the CMO during the course of the last few weeks -- standard Earth time. Nevertheless, I am as certain of it as I am that we are sitting in this room."

Watching his Science Officer's reaction, Kirk saw him clench the plastic arms of the chair, then relax before the flimsy material bent under his great strength. He envied the Vulcan his iron discipline at times, but knew what a toll it took out of the alien. Spock no doubt felt just as helpless as he did. He forced himself to listen to the medical officer.

"Captain Kirk feels that such an occurrence is an impossibility. And, I must confess to still not believing this has happened. But ONLY because it is McCoy who has fallen victim -- not because I doubt my findings. To our knowledge, only five men have ever been affected..."

"To our knowledge..." intoned Spock in a rather harsh tone.

"Yes, to our knowledge." The piercing eyes bored into Spock's. "But those five are well-documented. Since two of them were Vulcan healers, no one has ever doubted that such a disease exists. MORS has been classified as a disease of deep space, but that was when a flight to the planet Jupiter took months. Now, outside of the rimworlds, our galaxy has no section that hasn't been explored. Yet only five men -- all of them healers, or men of religion, have been stricken."

Spock shifted in his chair, the low light level shining off his hair and long features. "Your facts are correct. Sern'n, one of our greatest healers was the second of the five victims. He was instrumental in the discovery of radiation treatment for Vulcans." He turned to speak to Kirk, who sat listening to the two scientists. "Vulcans have always been extremely sensitive to skin cancers, due to the thin atmosphere and the intense radiation from our own sun. Sern'n was one of the first physicians to isolate that blood factor which could -- with certain medications -- help prevent such problems." His black eyes glittered, and an eyebrow rose as he said, "Can you imagine any Vulcan unable to stand exposure to our sun?"

For a moment Kirk was distracted, and he smiled ruefully. "No. But I know a lot of humans who find it pretty unbearable."

The moment was gone as Spock nodded, then addressed M'Benga. "In your opinion, what is so special about the medical personnel?"

"I wish to heaven I knew, Spock, because then I could go to Len and tell him my suspicions. It's almost impossible to deceive anyone with MORS for the simple reason they deny being sick at all." He shrugged, face somber as he stared at his fingertips. "All I'm going on is my gut instinct." The hand slammed down on the chair arm, "But I'd stake my reputation on my diagnosis!"

Kirk snatched at the proverbial straw, desperate to keep from drowning in some as yet unrealized sorry. "Just what makes you so certain, Dr. M'Benga? How can you be so positive without lab results to back you up?"

The handsome mouth was pulled down into a grimace as the Doctor met Kirk's stare. "It's not a casual assumption, Captain. When I was a small boy and my parents were stationed on Gamma Base II, a man was brought to the hospital there. My father was resident physician at the time, and he treated the man for several weeks. I was old enough to have the sight of him burned into my memory... and I've made the study of MORS one of my prime concerns over the years."

Kirk sighed. "I see." It was all he could say, even though inside he felt an uneasy dread that had nothing to do with M'Benga's news. Ghost walking on his grave? He shivered, then pressed his fingers to his forehead, angry because the information he sought was buried under a thousand other regulations and would not surface. "Isn't there someplace that treats these people? Run by a bunch of Brothers, or something? God knows I'll order the Enterprise to the ends of the galaxy if there's any hope at all!" He faced the physician and asked, "Is there hope? Or are we going to have to deal with — with the death of a friend? What do you suggest we do?"

"Sanctus," Spock said in a deep voice that made the word sound like a dark-toned bell in the small room. "A place run by aliens in the Order of Antronius; they offer sanctuary to the victims of incurable disease." He eased his back, obviously uncomfortable in the rigid chair, "However, regulations state that only the victim may set forth planetside. It is off-limits to all others. I have never heard of anyone defying that ban..."

M'Benga got slowly to his feet, resuming the stiff stance he had first employed. "Before I leave — with permission, sir — I'd like to brief you on what to expect, and to caution you not to upset either Dr. McCoy or MORS, for that matter."

Kirk heard the last part of the sentence and frowned. "This is hardly the time to be facetious, M'Benga," he chided, exchanging looks with the Vulcan. "Tell us what to do, how to behave, and we'll see to the crew. Is there any danger of contagion at all?"

He saw the flaring sympathy in the brown eyes and wondered. Surely the African knew how out of place that remark about humoring MORS was? Still, he kept silent, leashing the need to strike out at someone — anyone — in his frustration.

"You don't understand, do you, sir?" asked M'Benga quietly. He let his gaze slide over to where Spock sat, and added, "and neither do you. My deepest apologies to you both for taking something for granted. Why should you be aware of the terrible truth?"

"Man, what are you driving at?" grated Kirk, temper now rising rapidly, heat spreading through belly and throat, thawing the icy chill. "Just tell us what's needed to help Bones, then... we'll carry on until..." He shook his head.

"Captain, MORS is not a bacteria, nor is it some exotic virus. MORS is an alien entity." There was despair and anger stamped on the even features. "There is nothing I can do that will kill or weaken its hold on Len. It is a thing of total energy, a thing of such power that if angered, it could throw the Enterprise across the galaxy — into oblivion."

Kirk snapped to attention, seeing Spock rise to his feet in a single, catlike motion, suddenly and deeply aware of danger. This put an entirely new aspect on the situation, and he stared hard at the physician. "How long have you suspected this?" he asked evenly. "It is your duty to report anything -- ANYTHING -- that puts this ship or its crew in danger!" He clenched his fists, stayed where he was only because he saw a tiny shake of Spock's head to his right.

"I wasn't positive until this afternoon -- about fifteen hundred hours, sir!" rasped M'Benga, eyes narrowing in fury. He was poised like a great cat, ready to flail out in his own anger at what was happening. "A few minutes ago you challenged my facts -- or lack of them. Now, you're practically accusing me of being a traitor! I wasn't certain before this." He suddenly dropped the rigid stance, shoulders slumping, "You see, if MORS had known I was suspicious, it might've tried to stop me."

"If it is as powerful as you say, Doctor," came Spock's thoughtful observation, "then is there any chance that it knows of this meeting?"

There was a slight pause before the physician shook his head. "I don't believe so, since it has only lately taken McCoy as host. It seems to pass through a dormant -- or lethargic state at first. But, as it absorbs all the Doctor's energy, it will grow in strength."

"If it needs Bones' energies, is now the best time to... to..." Kirk faltered, seeing the way his reasoning was going. He began again. "Can't we reason with McCoy? Explain that he has to fight this -- this THING inside him? Isn't there something you can give him to control it while we come up with a way to neutralize it?" Kirk paced off the length of the cabin, seeking for some way to help Bones, yet ensure the safety of the crew. "Why in hell did it choose him?"

Spock walked over to the computer terminal and pressed a button, dragging up a chair and sitting down, his fingers splayed across the desk.

"ORDERS" came the voice activator.

"Commander Spock. I want the file on the planet Sanctus. Also all information on the entity MORS ETERNUS." He leaned back, almost visibly separating himself from the two humans who stood staring at him. He studied the screen with narrowed gaze, occasionally tilting his head. As the screen flickered with the required information, neither human spoke. Spock's hands ran spider-like across the console box, finally switching off the termination with a gesture of grim finality.

"Captain, if I may make a suggestion, we must in all haste begin the journey to Sanctus." The dark gaze was brooding. "Should this MORS either become aware that we suspect its presence, or that we know but are not going to cooperate, or should McCoy die en route, the alien may strike out at the entire crew. Nothing is known of the mental processes of this creature, but Dr. M'Benga is correct in his description of his power." He got to his feet and faced the African. "Doctor, I suggest you tell us all you know about what will happen to Dr. McCoy. And, before we leave the relative security of this cabin, we must have a plan of some sort."

Kirk found his voice, "Before we begin... just how long does McCoy have -- as a functioning member of the crew, that is?" He was grateful that some part of him was able to back away from the hurt, allowing him to think rationally. No one would understand better than the physician the importance of the ship's safety.

M'Benga, too, was all efficiency, ready to pass on what he knew. "Let me say that I have no idea how long Len has to live — or if he even suspects he's been struck with this monstrous illness. All I can tell you is that he feels no pain, will suffer no agony, will only think he is in the best of glowing health." He looked uneasy, "We will be the ones who suffer, will watch his wasting away." He spoke almost defiantly to the Vulcan, "Even you, Spock, are going to have your mettle tested. Len will resemble little more than a skeleton, an apparition so cheerful that you will choke on your words... as will we all."

"Is your recommendation, then, that we incarcerate him when his health is jeopardized by activity?" Spock's face was grim to the point of anger, yet he betrayed his caring in the gleaming eyes.

The laugh was bitter. "You mean lock him up? MORS would destroy anyone who tried such a foolish thing. No. You, the Captain, myself... in fact the whole crew, will have to give very convincing performances. And, we simply must get to Sanctus in the next few weeks, or we may be too late. Not even such power as MORS possesses can keep a dead man alive."

Suddenly, Kirk was weary, too tired to hear more of this terrible news. "Is the crew safe for the next week? The ship?" he asked curtly. He wanted to be alone, to sit and collect his thoughts and make peace with a world that allowed good men like Leonard McCoy to come to this. He blinked back hot tears. Why was his friend being stolen from those who cared for him?

The African nodded, his own fatigue greying his skin. "Safe? Yes, we're all safe — unless Klingons attack, or Romulans..."

"Then I suggest we each return to our respective cabins to allow the Captain to make his plans. Permission to leave, sir." Spock made a slight gesture with his hand, and M'Benga nodded.

Glancing from one to the other, Kirk managed to smile. "Permission granted, gentlemen." His gaze fixed on the physician, noting the look in the deep-set eyes. "M'Benga, I apologize for my anger. I'm sorry. Don't blame yourself for any of this. Some things can't be healed, can they? Besides, Bones would understand better than we do -- wouldn't he?"

"That's all too true, Captain. Sadly, he will probably never experience true anger again." Quickly, before anyone could question his last statement, the Doctor slipped out of the cabin and strode rapidly down the deserted corridor.

As Spock made to follow him, Kirk reached out to place a hand on the Vulcan's arm. "Wait, I need to talk to you." He glanced up and down the corridor, then closed the door.

Spock's features lost their harsh cast, his eyes open and knowing as he watched the Captain. "I understand your need, Captain, he is a good friend." He stepped back to the desk, poised and waiting.

Kirk smiled ruefully, "And have you no need of your own, Mr. Spock? Ah, forgive me, that's selfishness on my part... the human need to know that others are sharing their own pain." He went over to the autoserve and poured himself a cup of coffee, automatically offering the same to Spock, who shook his head. Sipping the liquid

absently, he was grateful for its warmth and bitterness. "Would you prefer water?" A half-smile shaped his mouth, "You know what Bones says about the ship's recycled water."

A glint of amusement in the dark gaze, then Spock nodded reluctantly. "Yes, since he has repeatedly stated that swamp water is fresher, and that bath water tastes sweeter." He looked only mildly repulsed.

Kirk chuckled, remembering, "Then that charlatan has the nerve to order the whole crew to drink at least a thousand ccs daily!"

The pain came at last, nearly doubling him over. He set down the cup with a trembling hand, tears stinging his lids. "Spock, there isn't going to be a miracle this time, is there? I feel it as certainly as my own mortality." His body shivered. "I'm scared... really scared that we're going to lose him. That everything we try will fail." Kirk smashed up the cup and threw it in the wastebasket. "Dammit, we've got to fight this thing!"

Spock did not answer, merely let the human wrestle with his dilemma. His being there was the only comfort he was free to give. Deep inside, his own grief demanded his concentration. They would indeed fight for McCoy's life.

Leonard McCoy stared hard at his reflection, surprised at how long this headache has persisted. After that damned bout of fever -- thanks to the miasmic swamps on Honathus -- he had really felt good. Now, perhaps his recovery hadn't been as complete as he had thought. He rubbed his temples, as if to ease the lingering sense of discomfort. Funny sort of headaches, actually, mostly at night when he was deep into some weird dream that for the life of him he could not remember the next day. Like now, for instance; his head still felt like it was filled with tiny drums, but he had no memory of even falling asleep.

Sighing in exasperation, he abandoned the mirror and stepped into the shower, relaxing as the warm sonics enveloped him in what passed for a bracing spray. He recalled the sweet water of home -- its cool, pure liquid as it slid down his throat, trickled over his body. Lord, he could almost taste it. Puzzled by the realism of the memory, he grabbed at a towel and stepped out of the enclosure, rubbing absently at his tingling flesh. Even dry, old habits like towelling after a shower were Earth pleasures he refused to give up. But what had brought that recollection to mind? He hoped he was not going to develop some senile sort of sentimental attachment for Earth at this late date.

As he donned his uniform he glanced at himself again, noting that even with the headaches he was looking better than he had in months. He grinned; the reflection grinned back, amusing him. Foolishness; trying to please a nonsensical image who stared impudently back.

He zipped up his boots. The drumming in his head ceased, and he frowned, humor vanishing at the inconsistency. Leaning over, sending more blood to his head, the pressure should have increased -- so why had the ache lessened? He would have to talk with M'Benga today. Maybe there were a couple of tests they had not run -- maybe in the excitement of things, he had picked up a virus unknown to one and all. His good mood returned; hell, he'd name it after himself... not a bad idea.

Carefully, he folded the discarded towel, put his after shave back in its niche, and picked up his tricorder. There was something else he wanted to do, but for the life of him he could not remember. Now that the headache was gone, so was the urgency.

However, there was a new discovery. If he inhaled deeply, closing his eyes, the scent of freshly-mown grass filled his nostrils. Only Earth's grasses, laden with chlorophyll, had that peculiar richness of odor; all the others -- on all the alien worlds -- were swamplier, a darker, mustier smell. The sudden longing for his home world nearly staggered him, and he steadied himself by placing a hand flat against the wall.

Home! Blue, Georgia skies, rich, red dirt that offered up all the scents of abundant life... he wanted to go home! Leaving his quarters, he headed for the lift, rapidly calculating just how much leave he had accumulated... enough for several months, anyway. There was not a single reason anyone could give him -- not even that stubborn Vulcan who thought vacations were unnecessary -- as to why he shouldn't go home.

"Officers' Mess!" he snapped to the hidden genie in charge of the lift, "and hurry!" He smiled, pleased that he had something new to think about. Besides, he was starved and there was nothing like a hearty breakfast to start the day.

As he headed for the mess hall he listened to the din of voices and the clatter of eating utensils. Maybe his decision would make the unflappable Spock lose his control for a minute. Damn, wasn't it going to be great to lie back and stare up at the skies... of... of Sanctus. God, how he wanted to go home!

Commander Spock sat upright at his desk, seeing nothing that was being presented to him on the viewscreen. He had returned to his quarters after spending time with the Captain, then had called up old, almost forgotten tapes and files on the history of MORS ETERNUS. And the planet Sanctus. For all his efforts, however, he had been rewarded with a vague ache behind his eyes, and the disconcerting knowledge that the Federation's information on this alien species was for the most part mere observation by poorly-equipped, overworked scientists. Even the Vulcan tapes had proven highly unsatisfactory, barren of information he could apply here and now. It was obvious that no MORS had ever invaded a starship: the case M'Benga had referred to had been a young physician who was diagnosed, then -- for whatever reason -- apparently had been spirited away by some over-zealous research scientist. Wondering vaguely what that person's fate had been, Spock forced himself to think about the immediate problem facing the Enterprise and its crew. Was the entity clever enough to sense that there surely would be plans made against the event it decided to commandeer the vessel? Was much of the fear surrounding this life-force ignorance? Or, and he admitted his own leanings in this direction, were all the stories about this rare creature true?

The memory of the Captain's face superimposed itself over his wayward thoughts and he impatiently tried to push it aside. If he was to help anyone it must be McCoy, whose plight would soon be impossible to hide. Since none of the officers or crew had ever seen the grim persona described so fervently by M'Benga, what would the reaction be? How was the Doctor going to react to the crew -- as MORS leeches more and more energy from the physician? Was that keen intelligence going to be sacrificed as well as the living tissue?

He flicked off the terminal, unable to absorb anything else from the data chips. His shift was about to start and he had his duty on the bridge ahead of him. But first he needed nourishment; his mental exercise had left him with a deep thirst.

Getting to his feet, Spock paused only long enough to stare at himself in the mirror. What had it been like for those two Healers? How had they coped with the almost-certain knowledge that their minds had been taken over by an alien force who apparently knew no mercy? Mind control; the idea was so abhorrent that try as he would, he shivered.

Quickly, he strode from his quarters out into the corridor, activating the security lock to his cabin. It was the first time he had done so in months... did he care to examine his motives? Did he believe that MORS posed a threat to him? He set out along the corridor, deciding that on his return he would have to do some deep, contemplative exercises. Upon entering the lift, he gave the command for the Officers' Mess, grateful that there was no one to share the ride.

The distinctive speech pattern of the Chief Medical Officer was the first voice he heard when he reached the large room. It came as no surprise that immediately thereupon he felt a sharp pang of regret. He concentrated almost fiercely on the selection of juices at the dispenser, delaying the ritual of greeting that these humans put so much stock in.

"Just fruit juice this morning, Spock? Shouldn't you be sampling some of that rimgrain bread?" The voice was Kirk's, the tone light, but when the Vulcan turned to reply he was stopped by the distress in the hazel eyes.

"Captain?" he said, wishing they were anywhere but here, "is something wrong?"

The distress gave way to bewilderment, then understanding at the question. "I've just seen Bones... he's over with M'Benga and Chapel." Fingers gripped his tray, white-blue of knuckles exposed. "Bones is -- see for yourself. M'Benga was right, we do have to make plans.... "

Spock swung his glance around so he could observe the physician without being seen. At first, staring at the human, there seemed to be little out of the ordinary, merely the medical team talking animatedly as they usually did. Then he caught a glimpse of something that brought a frown to his face. McCoy's tray was heaped with food, more so than the man ever ate, but the fork that lifted at intervals to the smiling mouth was nearly empty. Spock allowed his eyebrow to rise, for as he stared he saw McCoy staring back. Too late to swing around, he made his way slowly over to their table, followed closely by Kirk who had put only coffee and a small role on his tray.

"Spock! What've you got there?" McCoy turned to M'Benga with a devilish grin on his face. "Do you believe that? The strength of six men and all he's selected for breakfast is a serving of... what is it this morning, Spock?"

He knew it was a trap, and even knowing that, Spock felt himself drawn into the ritual. He had to admit that the physician was almost always pleased when he did so. "Actually, it's a combination of your own planet's bounty, Doctor. Nectarine, plum and peach, I believe."

"Of course. The good old citrus juices really wreak havoc in that Vulcan stomach, don't they?" The dark head tilted slightly, including his companions in the conversation.

"You know, I've always wanted to study the Vulcan digestive tract.... " Mischief gleamed in the sparkling eyes. "Would you like to be my control subject? I'd feed you nothing but Earth produce, then we could test just which bicarbonates and tummy soothers are the most efficacious. What say?"

It all sounded so normal, so like the physician's usual patter that Spock found himself entertaining doubts as to his illness. Except for that heaping plate, which was rapidly cooling off, and the fact that perhaps the repartee was almost too hearty, he could see little out of the ordinary. "I see from your own serving, Doctor, that you are in good appetite this morning. Perhaps we should make you the subject of the experiment."

Laughter rippled around the table, McCoy the merriest of them all. "Well, lemme tell you something, when you can shovel the stuff that comes out of that machine like I just did, I'll pronounce you ready for another project." He stared at the watchful M'Benga, "Can you remember the last time I ate that much? Won't be able to move for the whole damn day!" He sipped at his coffee, wiped his mouth, then got to his feet. "The rest of you may be able to sit around like sloths, but there's an experiment I'm working on..." his glance slid to Spock, "... don't worry, Spock — and I need to enter the results in the data banks."

He nodded cheerfully at the Captain, eyes brilliant, "Don't know when I've felt this good... must be something I ate!" Laughing at his own joke, he then turned and strolled from the room, pausing to chat with one of the med team who was just going off duty. There was only silence as four pairs of eyes watched his departure.

"I don't know how I'm going to keep this up," Chapel shut her eyes, then opened them to stare bleakly at Kirk. "The experiment he referred to? It's something he researched two years ago. The work's done, but he's acting as if only the prelim results are in." She bit her lip.

"Nurse Chapel, you must stay in control of your..." Kirk fell silent when she waved her hand.

"Leonard McCoy will never learn from me that he's ill! My time will be spent in researching this monstrous entity." Her blonde head tilted back a little, her usually gentle expression almost defiant. "At one time I was very good at research. I believe I still am! Excuse me, gentlemen." She got to her feet, carrying her tray over to the disposal chute, her slender frame rigid with control. She did not glance back.

Kirk sighed, wondering if anyone near them had heard the nurse's declaration. "It can't be easy for her these days. How long has she known?"

M'Benga shook his head, "I took the liberty of stopping by after I left your cabin, sir. She's very sharp -- had suspected he was ill, but had no idea of the cause." His tone was thoughtful, "We may find ourselves looking to her for strength in the upcoming days, she's a fine nurse." His tone was full of regret as he pushed away from the table. "Len said he wanted to talk to me -- about some tests -- maybe there's still some hope we can reach him. MORS must be getting stronger, so we have no time to waste."

Kirk waved a hand toward the heaping plate left on the table. "Before you leave, tell me about this.... " Can't Bones see that he left all that food? Doesn't he truly see it? How did MORS convince him that plate's empty?" His voice sharpened, but carried no further than the physician. "What about surgery? How will he judge the extent of

anyone's injuries if that damn THING is controlling his mind? My God, you realize that I'm left with only one decision, don't you?"

There was a pause that said everything, yet answered none of Kirk's questions. When the African finally replied it was in the same hushed tones. "He ate precisely one bite of each foodstuff... thus satisfying his taste buds. I'm not certain if even MORS can keep anyone alive if they don't take nourishment. As to the surgery — he hasn't even asked to see the schedule so far. I would hazard a guess that MORS knows that allowing patients to die would be strongly resisted... and I cannot find any record of one of these creatures causing needless deaths."

He glanced at his chronometer. "Sorry, sir, but I'm late for a medlab conference. Nurse Chapel is very strict about such matters." He smiled briefly, glancing once again at the untouched food. Impulsively, he scooped up the plate and dumped its contents into the disposal bin. Shaking his head, he strode from the room.

Kirk said little for a moment, then turned to his First Officer. "Suggestions, Mr. Spock? Anything you wish to say?"

The Vulcan sipped the last of the juice, then leaned forward, his dark eyes gleaming. "I took the liberty of watching Doctor McCoy very closely while he was here, and I am of the opinion that he was aware that something was wrong. His ebullient mood was not totally in character."

They waited until a cheerful tide of young ensigns washed over them, voices filled with laughter and taunts as to one another's chances under various instructors. Fresh-faced, brimming with life, they presented a picture of optimism and glowing health not shared by the two men seated just out of view. Ordinarily, the sight of the Federation's hopefuls brought a smile to Kirk's face. This time he barely saw them.

"Do you mean to say you think he knows he's... he's got that bastard inside him? Spock, I can't agree. You know Bones. He'd be hopping mad. Make some sort of fuss, then demand somebody DO something!" The regular features were pensive as the men exchanged solemn glances. "Do you suppose that — giving credence to your theory — he's trying to buy us some time? That perhaps he's tricking MORS? Is that possible?" He sighed, his appetite gone and his mood bitter. "Either way, Bones is the loser, isn't he? Come on, let's go to the bridge."

As soon as he stood up the noise level abated somewhat, the junior officers shushing one another as they favored Kirk and Spock with wide-eyed admiration and respect.

Spock was preoccupied; he and the Captain seldom indulged in the aimless chitchat so favored by most of the human crew. As they strode along, he tried to formulate a theory about the invader. Then, waiting for the lift, he said, "Have you wondered about MORS' perceptions of us? Do you think as the length of time left to McCoy decreases, and our efforts to save him become more apparent, it will sense the measures — the emotions — expended by us?" His tone was grave. "We will, after all, attempt to destroy it, will we not?"

The hazel eyes were troubled as Kirk replied, "In all truth, Spock, I'm not certain what I want to do. Without more information about just how big a threat MORS is to the Enterprise, and how long McCoy has to live if we do nothing, I find almost any move ill-

advised. In the meantime, we'll have to keep round-the-clock surveillance on sickbay and Bones' quarters."

The dark head nodded in understanding. "I shall implement that order immediately, sir." Entering the lift, he gave the command for the bridge, then once more returned to his postulation. "What are the possibilities of creatures like MORS understanding the way other races think without being physically linked with one of that race? What was MORS, in other words, before it invaded the good doctor?"

"Do I detect a note of apprehension, Mr. Spock? Are you wondering if MORS will in time begin to think like Bones -- or is it the other way around?" He closed his eyes, rubbing the lids with his fingers. "To be perfectly truthful, I haven't gotten past M'Benga's visit last night, nor breakfast this morning." Staring up at the lift's ceiling, he said softly, "You know that we're going to have to make contact, don't you?"

The Vulcan made no reply, merely waited like some solemn, sapient animal who somehow was aware that others controlled its fate. But the look in his eyes when they met the Captain's told the story.

Spock had known all along.

The bridge crew was relaxed, using the time before the Captain and First Officer arrived to share the latest gossip, trade news picked up from mutual friends, and -- no small matter -- make certain that they had gone over the logs left by the preceding crew. The last, hasty swallow of coffee was taken, the area policed; so that when Kirk and Spock stepped onto the bridge, all hands were at work. They presented a picture of efficiency.

Kirk was unsuccessful in masking his pleasure. "Hard to beat, aren't they?" he murmured to Spock. "Every one of them first-rate."

The Vulcan was less impressed, his keen eyes flicked from station to station, coming to rest finally on the young ensign who was working alongside Lieutenant Chekov. Her color was high, a demure smile on her lips. It was obvious that the human couple had not been discussing calibrations or astrophysics. He sighed.

Nevertheless, it was in this place that both he and the Captain were able to push aside the tragedy of Dr. McCoy. Kirk, busy checking new orders from Starfleet, only paused once to gaze up at the viewscreen... a faraway look in his eyes. Spock, trying to make sense of the gibberish from an obscure planet whose space they were passing over, had no chance to work out a time line for travel to Sanctus from anywhere en route to Star Base IX, and by the nasty tone of the garble, perhaps the idea of travel anywhere was going to be rendered moot.

When the lift doors slid open and the physician stepped through, no one noticed. "Well, glad to see you're not bored," came the amused comment.

Kirk spun around in his chair, smiling as he met the blue eyes. "Doctor. I didn't hear you." It was an inane comment, but all he could come up with for the moment.

If McCoy noticed the Captain's confusion he said nothing, merely stationed himself as he usually did by Kirk's chair. He looked around the bridge as if each and

every facet of the smoothly running station was of the utmost interest. There was about him an aura of incredible energy.

"You plotted the course for Sanctus yet?" he asked casually.

Kirk felt the blood drain from his face, to be replaced by a deadly calm. Was it McCoy speaking -- or MORS? "Sanctus? We're on our way to Star Base Nine... remember?" He turned slightly in his chair to catch his friend's expression. If he had hoped for surprise he was disappointed.

McCoy's gaze met his in a calm and amused glance. His lips moved to mouth his reply. "That's strange. I could have sworn that Spock was mapping a route to Sanctus. Weren't you, Spock?" There was no challenge or threat in his tone, merely idle curiosity.

The Vulcan set aside his calculations and left his station, coming to stand opposite the physician. He returned the intent gaze with one of his own. "Not as yet, Doctor, as I have been attempting to interpret the signals coming from A-699." He switched his glance to the Captain, "With little success I might add."

McCoy tilted his head, his eyes narrowed, and listened for a moment, then grinned. "That's Kur-dhu, Spock, I'm surprised you didn't recognize it." He spoke as if the language was something he heard every day.

"Indeed? I shall attempt to use the information while directing Lieutenant Uhura on her transmission." Quickly, brow raised slightly, the Science Officer returned to his post, slipping a disk into his terminal. A moment later, he joined Uhura.

"Bones, how in the hell did you know that? Kur-dhu is one of the rarest languages in the galaxy. I don't think I've even heard it used before...." Kirk got suddenly to his feet, coming to stand face to face with his Chief Medical Officer. Placing his hand on McCoy's arm, he almost withdrew it when the heated flesh warmed his fingers. He forced a smile. "Frankly, you surprised me. You always claimed you were a terrible linguist -- especially when it comes to ancient languages." He tried to ignore the glitter in those piercing eyes, but was terribly aware of the feeling of being assessed by someone else. Was MORS reading his thoughts?

McCoy made a deprecating gesture. "You're making a mystery out of something very simple, Jim. I used to work at a clinic in Atlanta. One of the nurses there was a Kurdha -- first true alien I'd ever seen." He laughed, shaking his head at the memory. "She was stronger than all of us puny Terrans... maybe even stronger than Spock. Not too bad looking, either. Well... not to other Kurdhi, I'm sure."

Kirk relaxed, feeling very foolish. As Bones had said, he was making a mystery where there was none -- or -- chilling thought -- had the alien fed the story to the Doctor? Just how resourceful was this thing? "Sounds like a formidable date, doesn't she? Why don't you and I go down to sickbay? I think I want my blood pressure checked. I've been experiencing some rather unpleasant headaches lately."

Immediately the amused expression was wiped from McCoy's face, replaced by one of concern. "You not well? Then let's go... you can tell me your symptoms on the way." He practically guided Kirk to the lift, saying over his shoulder, "Spock, the Captain'll be down in sickbay, you're in charge." Having stated the obvious he held the lift doors open for Kirk.

Kirk exchanged a long look with the Vulcan who was moving toward them. "I'm fine. Take the helm, Spock, and you might continue with those earlier calibrations while you're at it." He smiled slightly at the imperceptible nod Spock gave him.

As the lift doors closed, Kirk felt a moment's trepidation. What if this was part of MORS' plan? An abduction conducted by one of his best friends; using him as a hostage to force the Enterprise to detour to that little-known planet? He gave a sideways glance at McCoy who was staring off into space. Had Bones any will of his own left? When nothing happened and they began the walk to sickbay, he felt the knot of tension easing in his stomach. After meeting several crewmembers in the corridor and realizing that no attempt was being made to restrain him from speaking to them, he began to feel even more foolish. It was just great, he thought grimly, he was fast becoming paranoid -- and what good was that going to do?

"I think your nerves are shot, Jim," came a soft voice at his side. McCoy ushered Kirk into his office. "Sit down over there and tell me why you're so damn jumpy! At breakfast you looked as if you were goin' to throw up. You comin' down with something?" The keen eyes bored through the Captain.

Not for the first time Kirk cursed his inability to hide his feelings from his friends. Playing poker-face with Bones was going to be harder than hell on his ego. "Nothing to worry about, Bones. Just on edge from too much caffeine, or too little sack-time." He rubbed the back of his neck, feeling the slow pressure of tension as it tightened the muscles.

A tricorder appeared from nowhere. "Hmm, just as I suspected. You stay put." He set down the instrument and went into the med station, coming back with a hypo. "Tension, plus low levels of Vitamin B in your system." there was the familiar hiss of the spray, then the Doctor grinned. "Humans. I keep telling 'em that we can't forget how essential that B group is." A shrug as he was off on some other bit of business. "Whereas Vulcans -- you give 'em too much B and they go green on you within hours." He beamed at his small joke. "Now, then, you report back here in a couple of days and Nurse Chapel will give you a follow-up dose. You'll be feeling better in a week."

Kirk returned the smile. "Thanks, Bones. Guess I should count myself lucky that I don't have to take any of those horse pills you prescribed for Uhura." He rubbed his arm for a moment, then made ready to leave. "You're a quack, and you know it. Vitamins; hell, that was probably some damn tranquilizer just to keep me half-asleep."

"Just Vitamin B. I don't like to hand out drugs that dull the senses, you know that." He chuckled, "Boredom, my friend; what you need is a month of R&R on some planet with a beach and a few lovely ladies."

They smiled at one another, the physician's eyes brimming with humor and affection. There was no hint that McCoy was carrying a deadly creature within him. Kirk wondered how much longer he would be able to laugh with this good friend. The muscles in his neck began tightening again. However, wanting some exchange with his CMO, he asked, "And what about you? How are you feeling after your bout of fever? Oh, yes, I know all about it, so don't play the innocent with me."

The thin shoulders shrugged, and McCoy sat down, tapping his fingers on the desk top. "Funny, but I feel great. Better than I have in a long time, in fact." He leaned forward, sharing a feeling of excitement. "That's why I'm going to have M'Benga run a

few tests on me... to see just what kind of antibodies my system's built up. Could be there's a reason for all this renewed energy." Color blazed on his cheekbones.

It was more than Kirk could bear, so, quickly he said his good-byes, making his way back to his quarters instead of to the bridge. When he entered them, for once the serenity held no appeal, did nothing to fight the rising tide of despair.

He sat on the edge of his bunk. This time he HAD seen something. Had been keenly aware that MORS was watching him -- to learn what? Was the thing able to read his mind -- or, worse yet -- did it have the power to destroy whomever it decided was an enemy? He grimaced. Had he and his kind actually come very far on their travels through the stars? Earthbound men still sat at their desks and worried, as did starship captains. The problems of the latter were a hell of a lot more exotic -- but in the long run many of them were still unsolved.

Glancing around his cabin, he took little solace in its comforts. He ran his fingers along the metallic pattern in his bedcover. Temperature always just right -- thanks to the skin sensors in the weave. He accepted it for what it was -- a way to make man comfortable as he traveled through hostile space. He was as powerful as any man could want he supposed -- yet here he sat, afraid for a friend. Abruptly he rose to his feet, clenching his fingers into a fist. On his ship was a life form that no one had seen, that no one could prove even existed, yet he was afraid!

It was intolerable.

He went to the head, still wondering if MORS could see him. The small fire of resentment began to grow, taking fuel as he performed the necessities of life.

And, at long last, he faced what he was dreading. In order to stop the alien someone must contact it -- or attempt to do so. Of all his crew there was only one person capable of such a feat. Once again he had to ask his best friend to risk his life.

Laughter rang through the surgical ward and Nurse Chapel looked up, a smile coming unbidden to her lips. As she expected, the initiator of the humor was Doctor McCoy. His wry comments were for the young male patients who lay holding their sides while they howled. McCoy was retelling an old tale about his first date with an alien lady who possessed many fingers and even more talent. It was locker-room humor, and as such greatly appreciated by the convalescing -- and extremely bored -- men. As the bedlam quieted, Chapel peeked in on her charges, her gaze on the tall, very lean figure in blue.

"And so, let me tell you, don't ever ask a Novandian Prime out until you've counted her fingers! If there's more than sixteen, she's about ninety and desperate!" His grin was wide, his eyes sparkling. McCoy nodded good-bye to his patients and joined his nurse.

"You're looking fresh as a flower today. Ready to make rounds?" He strode past her, picking up a small instrument and hefting it in his palm. "Let's go check out that tumor that Yeoman Price had on her shoulder. Then schedule her for surgery sometime tomorrow."

Her good mood vanished, replaced by the dull ache of acceptance. He did not remember. "Sir, you discharged her yesterday... after that laser excision. She's to see you at... "

Fingers snapped as the physician nodded. "Damn! Of course, I remember now -- turned her over to M'Benga, didn't I? Should have known he'd take care of it." Carefully he replaced the shining instrument to its case, then came near her. Reaching out with gentle fingers he touched her lightly on the shoulder. "That leaves me free to get on with my research. If I'm needed I'll be in the lab."

Chapel nodded, her eyes misting as she watched him leave. Was she wrong, or had she sensed that McCoy was searching her face for the truth? Was he aware of the thing crawling around in his brain? She knew the Chief Medical Officer better than anyone on this ship -- better than the Captain, certainly better than Spock, even if they had shared minds, better than M'Benga, himself.

And no one knew her better than her beloved doctor. Yet, for the sake of the crew, she was playing a role she hated. She and Len had never been anything but honest with one another; in fact he was her best friend. What was she going to do if and when his personality and capabilities became a threat to them all? She needed advice, and the only person she wanted to talk to was Spock.

But there were duties to perform, other nurses to oversee, and gladly she lost herself in their doing. In the back of her mind, however, she mused over the Vulcan and how their relationship had changed. She smiled ruefully; she and Spock now enjoyed the kind of friendship she had always hoped for -- if friendship wasn't too strong a word to use when referring to the undemonstrative alien. Still, once she had gotten over her emotional daydreams, he had been willing to pick up the threads of their common interest -- science. It had proved a pleasant meeting ground, one where she felt more than adequate. Several times a month they would pour over their respective findings, Spock's lean features taut with the satisfaction of a theory proven right. Indeed, they had reached a place where he no longer felt compelled to recheck her findings and she accepted his acid remarks as mere truth, not sarcastic put-downs.

She sat down at her station, neat figure still looking fresh, her pale hair still in place. Busily she dictated entries in the Nurses' Log, noting McCoy's visit as if nothing were amiss. Her voice faltered, then she bit her lip, praying for the strength to continue this awful deception with the physician who was dying before her very eyes.

The next two weeks passed so slowly that Kirk felt as if he were caught in a time stasis. McCoy's condition seemed unchanged for the most part, yet there was an awareness of distancing from his friend. Bones remained cheerful, still heaping his plate only to nibble at its contents. Every now and then he would drink a measure of Savoicy, the mildly alcoholic beverage served only on Star Bases. No one knew just why the drink appealed to the physician, yet he had quit imbibing in anything stronger. M'Benga had come up with the notion that perhaps MORS had sampled it and found it to its liking.

Spock's reply had chilled them. "Then MORS must have invaded some other human -- with fatal results. How else could it have acquired such a taste?"

"What I wonder," came Kirk's comment, "is why MORS didn't just go to a MedFac -- say on Star Base Two. There are hundreds of physicians on base, and the

choice would have been easier." He, Spock and Scotty were all standing in the corridor. M'Benga had left for sickbay.

"Aye, and maybe the de'il himself had a hand in this." The engineer's face was grim, the black eyes snapping with hostility. "Sorry, Captain, but it's noo guid my pretendin' everything's all right. It scunnars me to think that.... " Frustrated, he handed his check list to Kirk for initialing. "It may have cracked the dilithium core in our last encounter with that Aparimylide scouter." He favored the Captain with a telling look. Before Kirk had a chance to respond, they heard approaching footsteps.

"I'd like to call this a beautiful day, but out here that's rather foolish, isn't it?" McCoy's chuckle was genuine. "What're you three standing in the corridor for? Can't you conduct business anywhere else -- say in the Rec Room?" The startling blue eyes peered critically at Kirk. "And you have only been in once for your dose of B! You're as pale as a ghost, perhaps what you need is a prescription for some sunshine. We weren't meant to live like moles, remember that."

Scotty's jaw thrust forward, his eyes narrowed in challenge. "Aye, and just who'll run this ship if the lot of us is off cavorting under the sun lamps? I'll hae ye ken that the Enterprise deserves... "

Kirk put up an admonishing hand. "Easy, Scotty. Bones was just reminding us that there's more to life than crystals and circuitry, weren't you?" He shot a puzzled glance at the engineer, worried about his open hostility. Then, meeting Spock's thoughtful gaze he suddenly realized what was happening. Scotty, mindful of the thing sapping the life from McCoy, was suspicious... not knowing if it was the physician handing out advice, or some formless creature determined to survive.

It was what he feared the most. Would the rest of the crew, armed with that instinct for survival, react as his engineer just had?

"Scotty knows exactly what I meant." came a hoarse whisper that caught them all off guard.

"Len, mon, I -- I.... " Scotty shook his head, trying to hide his distress.

But it was Kirk who saw the facade slip, who saw past the grin, the too-bright eyes. Bones knew! He was trapped, held in a remorseless grip, and he knew it! However, even as he locked glances with the physician, the expression was gone.

Smiling broadly, the Doctor spoke, "Well, I've too much to do to stand around with you three. See y'all later." A wave of the hand, and he was leaving, heading God knew where.

Immediately, Kirk turned to Spock and Scotty. "You saw? He knows."

"I could cut oot me tongue," Scotty said. "At first I dinna believe it, but this time, I saw the de'il myself. Watching our every move like some great eye peering out a hole." He shivered.

The Captain frowned, Spock had not said a word for the last five minutes, merely stood, somber, as if waiting for something to happen. He handed Scotty's reports back, then said, "Spock, it's time that we made some plans. Meet me in the Conference Room

at thirteen hundred hours. Scotty, see to that engine... we may have to travel faster than we've ever done before."

"Aye, sir. Only this time the devil's not on our heels, he's right here wi' us." There was something very grim about the usually placid engineer.

The Conference Room was too warm, although the Vulcan looked comfortable enough, and M'Benga gave little sign of noticing the heat. Kirk sighed, but said nothing. After all, the Captain wasn't supposed to notice such a minor discomfort. "Well, I think our first order of business is to hear from you, Doctor. Just what changes -- if any -- have you noticed in Bones?" He was glad Spock had thought to put two security men outside the door. He was not in the mood for any interruptions.

Large, brown eyes met his. "There is a noticeable diminishing of strength, sir. Len actually came down to the lab and had me perform some tests on him." The dark hands with their pale palms lay open and still, "I'm not certain just how he manages, unless MORS has come to see that scientific knowledge on this subject is vastly important. It is, after all, absorbing the Doctor's very psyche."

Kirk nodded, "And how long do you think he'll be able to keep up this facade of beaming health? It seems to me he's lost a lot of weight."

"If I may be permitted to speak, Captain," said Spock, "Nurse Chapel has been keeping log time on the hours he spends actually caring for his patients." His eyebrow canted upward, and he leaned forward, voice low, "The good doctor is removing himself from his duties for over forty-six percent of actual time."

"You mean he's not working? Where is he, then? I sure haven't noticed him around -- he almost never comes up to the bridge any more."

The Vulcan nodded, then raised a finger to his lips, "Gentlemen, I believe someone is outside the door."

Kirk got to his feet and quickly went to the door, leaning against it. "I don't hear anything, Spock. You sure?"

The dark head nodded, reproof in the alien's glance. "A single set of footsteps, followed by conversation." He shrugged, "The presence is gone now."

Immediately the Captain opened the doors, speaking rapidly to the two young guards. When he returned, his face was somber. "They saw no one, Spock. Said they didn't talk to anyone, either."

"Then, Captain, I believe it is time to appraise the ship's personnel of what is happening. Or we may find MORS has found a way to control crewmen with far more important duties than guarding a door." Spock looked toward the far wall of the room, then activated the computer terminal on the table. "Spock, First Officer."

SPOCK IDENTIFIED. PROCEED.

Kirk sat down, turning to watch the Vulcan as he fed directions into the computer. Catching M'Benga's eyes, he saw that the physician was as mystified as he was. Still, he knew better than to ask questions before the Vulcan was ready to answer them.

"Give me a deck to deck check of all life forms on the Enterprise. Beginning... now."

AFFIRMATIVE. SCANNING FOR LIFE FORMS ON THE BRIDGE. THERE ARE SIX. ALL HUMAN.

SCANNING DECK 23 AND CARGO BAY.

THERE ARE 84 LIFE FORMS. SEVENTY-TWO ARE HUMAN. FOUR ARE ANDORIAN. FOUR ARE....

They sat immobile, listening as the disembodied voice scanned each level of the ship. Suddenly, Spock pressed a control, speaking briskly. "Scan sickbay personnel, then the science labs."

"Spock," interjected M'Benga, "Len said he had a meeting with Ensign Shaleddek." He slapped his forehead in disgust. "And Shaleddek is from Partha!"

Impatiently the Captain shot a glance at the African. "What are you saying? Just what's the significance of all this?"

"Ordinarily nothing. But the Parthans have a treaty with Sanctus... Their cargo ships enter Sanctan ports all the time."

The First Officer held up his hand for silence as the computer began speaking.

SICKBAY: ELEVEN HUMANS. TWO RIGELLIANS. ONE ENERGY SOURCE NOT IDENTIFIABLE. ONE PARTHAN.

"Damn! What's that supposed to mean? Spock, I want a security party to get down to sickbay as fast as possible." Kirk frowned, "All I want them to do is see who's down there.... No phasers! I'll slap anyone who uses one into the brig so fast his head'll spin." The Captain headed for the door, leaving his two companions behind. "I'll be on the bridge, waiting for your report." He paused, looking hard at M'Benga. "Doctor, just what is it that the planet Sanctus imports from the Parthans?"

The African stared, "I... I'm not certain, sir.... "

"Find out!" Kirk barked. "It's time we had some answers. If everybody's dead -- or dying there -- what are their needs?"

Spock and M'Benga watched as Kirk left, saying nothing to one another while the Captain's orders were relayed to Security. That done, Spock got to his feet, "You seem thoughtful, Doctor. Have you remembered something?"

"Nothing good, Spock," replied the physician. "Only that I seem to recall the Parthans also are very chummy with the Klingons, although what that has to do with our

dilemma, I can't say." He faced the Vulcan, his face grave. "MORS is far more powerful, now. Apparently, McCoy's human life signs are fading. I'll try to run a few tests on him tomorrow, then relay them to the Captain. Perhaps MORS will attempt escape -- with a shuttle that won't be difficult -- and who's to stop him?"

"You are forgetting, Doctor, that we are still at least six sectors from any Parthan trader ship. The Federation has never issued them permits for Star Base exchanges, nor even their smallest scout ships have the use of our trade lanes." He pressed a control, bringing into view a detailed map of the galaxy. "See? The Enterprise is... here. Partha about eight sectors out, and Sanctus... approximately... there." I long finger pointed to a tiny dot just inside the Rigellian Corridor. "Even if he were a pilot, the good doctor would be incapable of flying a shuttle that distance. They are not meant for such flights. His being ill makes such a postulation highly improbable."

"I suppose you're right, of course," responded M'Benga, "but I can't help feeling that MORS is going to try something... and try it soon." He struck his palm with a fist, "Damn! If only we knew what Len was thinking -- was feeling -- indeed, if he's even aware MORS is killing him."

Spock stared off into space, then shut down the terminal. "I believe the Captain wishes us to carry out his orders, Doctor. So while I look up the details of the Parthan trade agreements with Sanctus, may I suggest that you look in on sickbay -- in case Doctor McCoy is still there." His tone was quiet, and he saw the lines of strain that etched the dark face. "There is nothing more you can do," he added, "The blame for this tragedy does not lie on your shoulders."

Gratitude flashed in the brown eyes, and M'Benga rested his hand momentarily on the Vulcan's shoulder. "Thank you, Mister Spock. I realize that we are all in this together. Still, there must have been some test..." He looked down, shaking his head. "I know, no recriminations; they solve nothing, do they? I'll be on my way... and good-night, Spock."

They walked out of the briefing room together, each heading for opposite ends of the corridor, each silent as the lifts whisked them to other rooms, other tasks. But they both carried the features of the same face in their minds far into the night.

From deep in the belly of the Enterprise came the familiar, reassuring sounds of its engines. They represented information that each crew member's mind registered subconsciously: all is well within this metal home; you may perform whatever duties you have been assigned without anxiety; any interruption of performance will be taken care of by the engineering crew. And, for the most part, that information was taken in without further thought. As the starship sailed through the limitless spacial sea, over four hundred humans worked, repaired circuits, made love, or slept. If any of them worried, it had nothing to do with the performance of the ship's engines.

Only one human being did none of those things.

Leonard McCoy rose from the half-sleep of dreams and began clearing a space on his desk. From the locker facing his bunk he removed a small metal box, setting it precisely on the right hand corner of the desk. From the hidden panel-safe which he had had installed before this last voyage, he took a somewhat larger box, made of high-impact plastine. Lastly, concealed in the storage drawer under his bed, he withdrew a

slim, grey-green cylinder which was sealed at each end. He piled the last two objects in the center, then sat down, expelling a breath as he stared hard at their various shapes. From the desk itself, he removed a key engraved with strange symbols. During this time he made no attempt to turn on a light. It mattered little, for the cabin was lit with the glow from his person -- a blue aura that was with him all the time now. His eyebrow quirked upward when the fact registered and he moved his hand, watching closely as the light illuminated the desk's surface and the three objects on it. Except for the narrowing of his glance, he made no outward acknowledgment of the phenomena.

Pulling back his hand, he forced himself not to clench his fist, making certain that his mind concentrated only on the chore ahead of him. He felt no fatigue, no hunger, in fact was barely able to feel the temperature in his quarters. Clothing made him uncomfortable -- not because it chafed his flesh -- but because it did not. Compressing his lips, he slipped the little key into the lock in the cylinder. There was an audible hum, then a click so faint that only the sharpest of ears could hear it. After a moment an opening appeared in the opposite end of the container and McCoy caught the contents as they slid out.

The first he set down, the second he placed on top of the nearest box. The third, a pendant with a jewel of exquisite shape, he held up in front of him, a faint smile on his lips. It was as large as his thumbnail, faceted until it reflected light to every corner of the room. Even in the dark the gemstone flashed all the colors of a Terran sunset. Rose, amber, flame, apricot, violet, all splashed the ceiling and walls with their dancing light. In the heart of the stone glittered yet another color, blue-green fire that seemed to change shape even as the physician swung the chain in a slow arc. Then, abruptly, he crushed the necklace in his hand, as if trying to absorb all its beauty into his soul. Lashes swept down on the prominent cheekbones. "Natira, Natira...." came a hoarse whisper, "where are you now?" After a pause he opened his eyes and gently laid the necklace down.

Without further hesitation he began dictating into his recorder. "I, Leonard McCoy, Chief Medical Officer of the Starship Enterprise, acknowledging that my hold on life is rapidly deteriorating, do desire the following people to receive my worldly possessions: Since my will -- as required by Starfleet -- is already filed on Earth, and the principal beneficiary is my daughter, Joanna McCoy Leonhart, these further bequests represent only those possessions I have on shipboard. These are direct bequests, and I ask Captain James T. Kirk, when he hears this log, to administer the disposal of the articles.

"Item: To Christine Chapel I leave one necklace. It is a fifteen carat Proteafire, suspended from a gold chain twenty inches in length. Lieutenant-commander Chapel has been a loyal and brilliant colleague, and a good friend. I wish her well, and pray that her highest hopes are fulfilled."

He sighed, switching off the recorder while he gazed into the dusk. Then, he picked up a ring, twisting it between his fingers much as he had the necklace. After a few seconds he slipped it onto the third finger of his left hand. It was a massive piece, formed from some metal that shone like burnished silver. In its center was set a stone of jet, its entire surface covered with tiny runes carved with meticulous care. As he sat, arm extended, he felt a tingling sensation travel up his left arm, spreading throughout his body until it slowly disappeared. Still concentrating on the stone, he nodded only after it glowed with a flashfire of red. "Still have the power after all this time, do you?" he remarked softly. "I guess that old man wasn't mad after all."

Swiftly he transferred the ring to his right hand, going through the same ritual as before. This time the sensations spread through the right side of his body, and he stared until he saw the gem flare again, this time with a flicker of blue. Quietly he removed the ring, weighing it in his palm, concentrating on the runes. "Lucky you told me what the damn thing says, Mehmerup, or I might have made the wrong decision," he whispered. He sat back, then, closing his eyes and reciting, "Whosoever weareth me upon his left hand shall rule the hearts of many: Be it for good or evil. Whosoever weareth me upon his right hand shall gather riches unto him: Be it for good or evil." McCoy opened his eyes, then impulsively flipped the ring into the air, catching it deftly as it tumbled into his palm. He would have disposed of it long ago but it had proved indestructible, thus was dangerous beyond imagination. As he tried to remember the old regent's face, he realized that MORS had already eroded those most unpleasant days... obliterating the past... leaving him with gaping holes in the fabric of his mind. He pounded the table in his frustration, then became very clam. It was always the same... he had learned to play a cat-and-mouse game with his killer; learned that MORS had become affected by his own biorhythms and thus needed to snatch sleep in the hour just before dawn.

McCoy sat, perfectly still, savoring the luxury of solitude. Not that he was truly alone -- he knew that if anyone came by, or he experienced an adrenaline surge, MORS would take control again. As a result he had no one to talk to during this precious period of time when his mind was clear and able to make decisions. Realizing that he was wasting that time made him set the ring next to the necklace and address the recorder.

He steadied his voice, betraying little of his emotional turmoil. "Item: a large, Ruler's ring from the planet Cleth. Given to me by the deposed ruler, Mehmerup. It is pure syntite, overlaid with silver, with a heartstone of black phoenicia. I wish to leave this to First Officer Spock, who is the only man I know with the personal strength of character to use this ring wisely. Read the inscription carefully, Spock, and when you return to your home world, use it accordingly. It cannot be destroyed, and so mustn't fall into the wrong hands. Over the years I've come to regard you as more than a friend, and your word has always been your bond. Good-bye, and may you live long and prosper."

Again he fell silent, sensing a welling of grief that threatened to break his resolve. He was not the kind to sit and whine about luck, nor ponder the significance of his fate. What gnawed at him was the surrender of privacy, the loss of memory. Soon even these few minutes of clarity would be stolen, and then he would be truly dead. He linked his fingers, trying to be analytical about MORS... after all, this was an opportunity to study the creature firsthand. Only he knew now why there was so little information about them. Whenever he tried to think -- to be a physician first, a victim second, MORS seemed to block off that part of his mind. He was certain that Kirk would ask Spock to try to contact him -- or MORS -- very soon and he dreaded the thought. He was absolutely positive that the Vulcan would be risking his life -- and sanity to do so. MORS had stolen his life; he was not about to permit Spock's to be wasted. But still, a very small part of him wanted to speak with someone... to share these last moments of sanity... before he was doomed to walk those dusty childhood paths forever.

That thought galvanized McCoy into action. Eyes snapping, he quickly picked up the third article. It was a coin, a full six centimeters across, and heavy. He ran an exploratory finger over the mint-condition surface. A coin from the First Empire of Rigel, only three of them ever found. It had been stored in an amphora of honey, sealed for a thousand years, and he had been paid for his services with it. He had taken the coin, giving no thought as to its real value until Sulu had spoken of an auction he had attended. Its value had quadrupled since then. Now it lay in his hand, gleaming like the sun, and with it he could purchase ten starships.

There was no question as to its disposal. Still holding it, he began his next entry. "Item: A large coin, a Rigellian Empirion. Coin bears the likeness of Hirus Primrem and is in mint condition. Its certificate of authenticity is in the cylinder. I leave this to my dear friend Captain James T. Kirk, with the fond hope that he will find it in his heart to remember me and what I was, and what we both believed in."

There was so much more that he wanted to say, but he found he was incapable of further speech. Jim would understand and there were other bequests to be made. Leaning back, he tried to focus on that part of himself which MORS now held. An imperceptible place, thrumming with pure energy. MORS was quiescent.

In short order he assigned his liquor collection to Scotty, along with his library of Terran humor. To Uhura he left a bracelet set with huge red pearls. To Sulu a pistol from the Civil War that the gun buff had long admired.

M'Benga was next, and he was torn between the scientist and the human friend. The latter won out; and after he disposed of his medical library of tapes and notes, he spoke briefly of the African's support and loyalty. Then, exhausted, McCoy sat slumped in his chair, staring at the smallest box.

His hands trembled as he reached for it, fumbling with the lid. With great tenderness he set it down, switching on the light for the contents had no refractive powers, nor was it of value to anyone else. But for him it held far more power than the ring, and stirred far deeper emotions than the necklace Natira had given him.

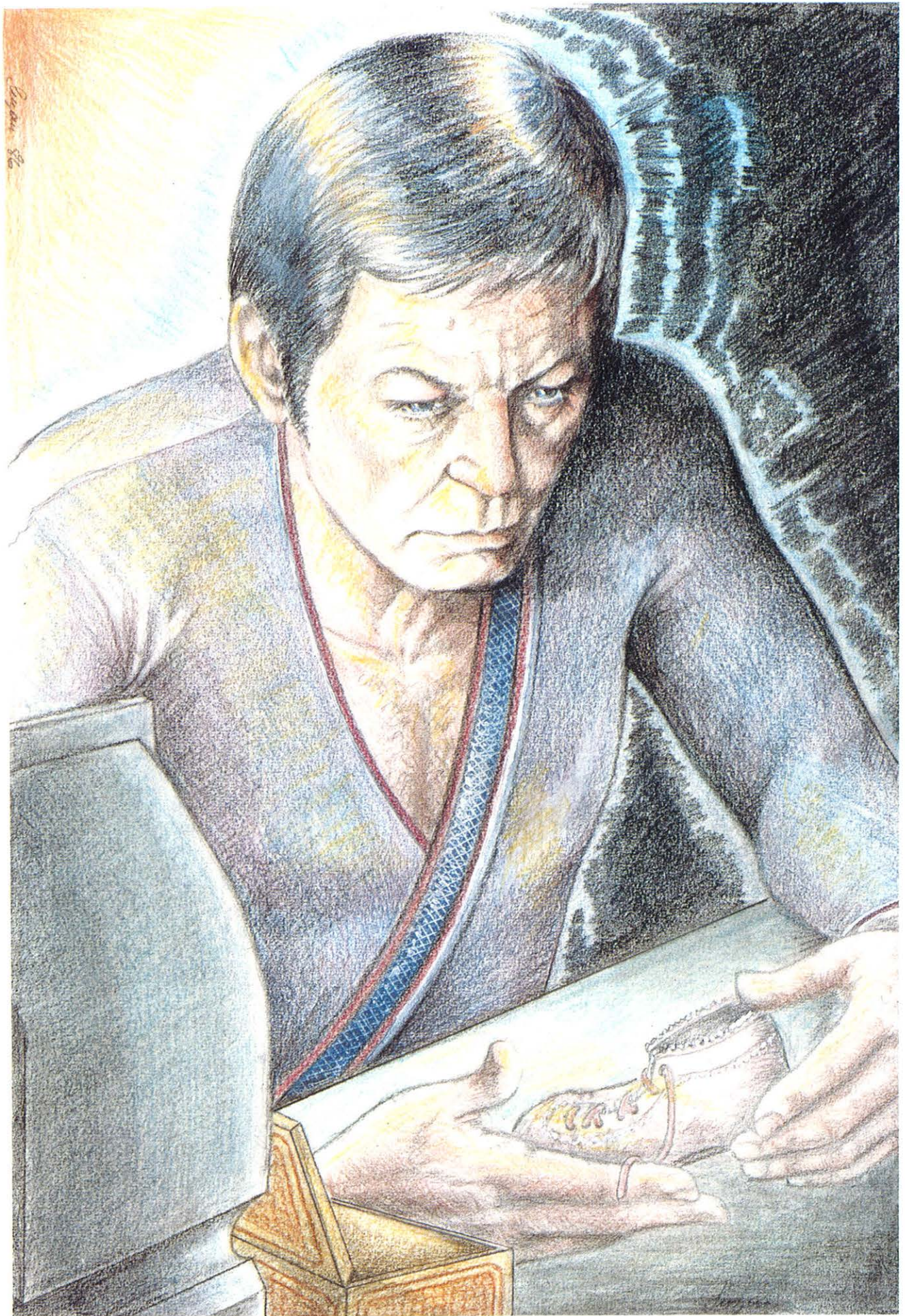
It was a baby shoe. The fine leather surface was scraped and worn, with myriad places where little toes had pressed against the soft skin. He touched it with a gentle finger. It was the only treasure he wanted, the only thing in the world that held any value for him, the only memory that belonged to him alone. His daughter: that chubby, chortling, bundle of curls and laughter who had made his early days as joyful as any king's.

He set the shoe in his palm, noting that the leather still held some of the color — palest pink — and it pleased him no end. Joanna, now grown from infant to lovely womanhood, with two children to make her own life full. He smiled ruefully, acknowledging his male tendency to attach so much importance to motherhood, but where was the future to come from, otherwise? Joanna had seen to his own immortality in this way, and he paused to think about the grandsons he would never see — would not ever see, his hand wrapping around the memento in despair.

He lifted his head, vision clearing; all his life he'd worked toward the betterment of man, dedicating his career, the direction he went because of his daughter. Perhaps, in that field he had achieved some success, Lord knew the struggle had not been easy.

He lifted the shoe to his lips in final salute, "For you, Joanna," he whispered. "I've never stopped loving you." Carefully, he set the shoe down. It was the only thing he would take when he left the Enterprise.

Something changed, some spark in the room, a flare of the blue light... quickly, McCoy began putting away the articles he had taken out. He removed the tricorder, hoping that MORS had not roused enough to notice what he was doing. When everything was replaced except Joanna's shoe, he went to put it back in the box — and couldn't. Wearily, he settled back in his chair, closing his fingers around the tiny object. He had no way of knowing if MORS would allow him to keep this token of earlier days. With an



air of desperation, he fought to sear her memory so deep in his mind that no matter how the alien might try, those bittersweet years would be with him. Tears scalded his cheeks; what would he have left of his daughter if they were gone? He wept openly, then, and all about him the blue light flared and pulsed as MORS surged back from sleep.

In his own cabin, James Kirk was also awake, sitting at his desk, chafing at the puzzle Spock's research had set before him. He ignored his aching muscles, and the inviting bunk in the next room, concentrating instead on the Parthan trade agreement with Sanctus. Harmless enough: clothing, food, primitive tools, a few very basic medicines, all delivered in the tiny trade ships owned by the Parthan government. He ran a hand through his hair, realizing that apparently there were no privately-owned ships on Partha. Why? He thought about the young ensign he had sent to Engineering; on many worlds he would qualify as a millionaire, yet apparently he owned little in the way of material goods. Partha, it seemed, bred for intellect and integrity, not for greed. Indeed, Kirk could find no evidence that the Parthans even engaged in intergalactic exploration. Their trading fleet crisscrossed its own planetary system and that was it. Except for Sanctus. Impatiently he drummed his fingers in a staccato beat on his desk, studying the mystery.

Eyes intent on the viewing screen, he took no notice of his cold coffee as he swallowed several mouthfuls, except to make a face at its bitterness. Federation regulations were most emphatic when it came to stating the case concerning Sanctan space. He pressed the control then sat back to read words he now had committed to heart.

REGULATIONS STATE IT IS FORBIDDEN TO ENTER THE SANCTAN NEUTRAL ZONE. ANY NATION SEEKING CONTACT WITH SANCTUS MUST FIRST OBTAIN PERMISSION FROM FEDERATION OFFICIALS.

ANY VESSEL UNDER FEDERATION JURISDICTION WHICH DEFIES SANCTAN SPACE WILL LOSE ITS PERMITS AND ITS CAPTAIN WILL BE COURT-MARTIALED. NO INDIVIDUAL MAY SET FOOT ON SANCTAN SOIL ON PENALTY OF DEATH.

Kirk ignored the rest of the wording, insofar as the Enterprise and its crew was concerned only the four regulations he had just read pertained to his predicament.

And just how was he going to explain all this to MORS if it came right down to that? Was the alien so powerful that it could protect the ship if they did violate the sanctions? He smiled grimly, then shut down the terminal. He had a weapon at his disposal that was far cleverer, and a hell of a lot more trustworthy than McCoy's killer.

He had Spock.

The Captain got to his feet and quietly let himself out of his quarters. Ahead of him a few stragglers from the Rec Room headed for the lift and he managed to mingle with them until he reached his destination. As he tapped on the door, one of the men burst into song, only to be quickly hushed by his companions, who pointed toward Kirk. When the door slid open, Kirk nodded, smiled briefly, then stepped into Spock's cabin while the chastened -- and almost sober -- ensign stared in surprise.

Even though Kirk had been in Spock's cabin many times, he still studied the Vulcan's quarters with a curious eye. The altar with its pot of embers, the silken draperies, even the statuary always seemed to offer a glimpse into the soul of this reserved and loyal alien. The rich heritage so carefully shielded from prying eyes revealed itself here, as did the serenity of spirit which gave Spock his self-confidence, his aura of quiet assuredness. He felt some of the tension slipping away and finally he spoke.

"Spock," he said gravely, reading the flash of understanding in those dark eyes. "I guess you know why I'm here."

The taller man, solemn features lined with a golden glow from the lamp, nodded. "Would you care to sit down, sir? I have been preparing for the mind-meld."

"Jim. For heaven's sake, call me Jim." Kirk forced a smile. "There's a lot to discuss and rank'll only get in the way." He took note of Spock going over and turning down the thermostat, accepting the courtesy without protest. "Can you read minds?" he teased, desperate to keep the mood from becoming gloomy, but Spock's action had only emphasized what he was risking. "I wish there was some other way, but we have to make contact by tomorrow night. There's not much time for a course change as it is." He rubbed the back of his neck, then asked, "Have you got any of that plum stuff -- the mild one?"

Amusement registered momentarily before the Vulcan nodded. Spock removed a bottle and two glasses from a shelf in the alcove and quickly poured out two servings of the amber liquid. Carrying the glasses over to where Kirk sat, he commented, "I have accessed some archaic records about Partha that are quite interesting." He handed the drink to the Captain who accepted it automatically, but who made no attempt to drink it.

"What did you find out?" Kirk raised the glass to his lips, his gaze sharp.

The other man shook his head. "The records show that no Parthan has ever done more than orbit over Sanctus. They do cross the neutral zone without challenge -- have done so for hundreds of years."

Kirk started, "Hundreds of years! Why, I was under the impression that Partha was only entering space travel and that was why they hadn't sent out intergalactic exploration teams." He became thoughtful, toying with his empty glass, "Then the Parthans are a lot more sophisticated than I thought." His gaze met and held the Vulcan's. "What's their secret, Spock? Why does Sanctus trade with them?"

"I was unable to determine that, Jim, but perhaps it is something as simple as the proximity of their worlds. It would seem logical."

Kirk got to his feet, and began pacing the floor. "Then why have the Sanctans forbidden everyone else contact? Surely, it would be to their advantage to expand their trade agreements... We could offer them protection." He looked up to see Spock's eyebrow raise. "Well, it's a small planet and something bad must have happened to make them so hostile."

"Protect them from whom, Jim? Not even the Klingons dare penetrate their Neutral Zone."

Kirk stood next to the Vulcan, features bleak. "I know, I know, but I need answers... I can't just send Bones down there to God knows what fate.... " The pain in his gut was back, forcing him to bite his lip. "We're out of time... and guesses, my friend. It's all up to you."

Picking up the glasses, Spock set them over on the counter, then approached the small, ember-filled pot. From a crystal jar he took a pinch of powder, sprinkling it into the bowl. "What do you wish to learn, Captain?"

The room seemed to fill with the fragrance of cedar, the aroma of fresh pine, carried on a grey plume of smoke that drifted lazily toward the ventilator. Kirk felt the tension lessen, the pain ease, and he turned to the Vulcan, "Does McCoy really want to go to that damned planet -- or is it something MORS has forced on him? Does he know what MORS is up to? Does he know what will happen if we do take him to Sanctus?" He took a deep breath, "Is he... how much longer does he have... with us... like... a human?" The expressive mouth twisted in grief. "Spock, if you can reach him, tell him... how we feel... I hate to ask it of you." The head dropped, "As a favor... "

A hand rested on the Captain's shoulder, the touch warm and strong. When Kirk looked up he saw understanding and compliance in the Vulcan's gaze. Then the touch was gone. "I have noticed that the aura around the Doctor seems to diminish after 18 hundred hours, Captain, and that McCoy is seldom seen after 22 hundred hours. With your permission I will attempt to contact him at that time tomorrow." The Vulcan was speaking formally, his entire manner reserved, as if the raw emotion Kirk had displayed had somehow offended him.

Kirk knew otherwise. It was only Spock's way of allowing him to pull himself together. Long ago, he might have been angry by the lack of acknowledgment; now he knew just how deeply the Vulcan was affected by his friends' pain. He smiled, then nodded. "We'll be waiting for you. I'll have M'Benga stationed outside McCoy's door... just in case. Oh, don't report for duty tomorrow. I know you need time to get ready." He didn't add the automatic admonition about getting some rest. Spock always responded to that with a tilt of the eyebrow, and a wry comment about human needs. As Kirk went to the door, he turned to the alien who stood watching him, looking very vulnerable. "Good luck, Spock." He left the cabin without waiting to hear Spock's reply.

The object of Kirk's curiosity was making his way toward his cabin when Spock fell in step beside him. There was nothing to mark the Parthan as different: about average height, medium build, certainly humanoid, albeit better than average-looking, Ensign Shaledek had merely been part of that homogenous blend of crewmembers on the Enterprise. Until now.

"Ensign," began the Vulcan, not missing the haughty bearing and poorly-hidden suspicion on the young man's face. "I would like a word with you -- in the briefing room." Spock took the lead, knowing that duty would force the alien to follow him without protest, and thus the first contact had been breached. Whether or not he found out just what intrigued McCoy about the Parthan would be due to his own line of questioning. The encounter interested him in more ways than one.

"Commander Spock?" Shaledek halted outside the lift, his brown eyes alight with curiosity. "Am I on report, sir?" Even standing still the ensign fairly crackled with energy and good health.

The lift doors opened, revealing several members of security, who stared in open admiration of the Vulcan. Spock, not wishing to give the grapevine any new gossip, refrained from answering the Parthan's question. Shaledek, not able to hide his nervousness, bit his lip in frustration. That act did not escape the sharp eyes of the men in red. Since they had already been asked to keep an eye on the alien's movements, it was apparent that the powers-that-be had found something wrong. What it was was anybody's guess. The men carefully avoided looking at one another, concentrating instead, on staring at the back of the Vulcan's head. When he and the ensign got off the lift and headed toward the briefing room, security was already making bets as to the topic of their conversation. That they might be mistaken didn't bother them one bit.

"Am I on report, sir?" Shaledek repeated. "Has my work been unsatisfactory?"

As the Briefing Room doors slid open Spock paused, raking his glance over the youth. What were the signals he was picking up? Who did the Parthan remind him of? "You are not on report, Ensign. However, you are in possession of information Captain Kirk feels is important.

Shaledek looked mystified but followed his superior into the unoccupied room. "Me? But I don't know anything about anything, sir. Commander Scott just told me..."

Spock waved his hand, bringing immediate silence. "Sit down, Ensign. It is not your knowledge of the Enterprise that interests Captain Kirk." Spock seated himself, putting a chair between himself and the Parthan. He folded his hands on the table, then tried to reassure the other man that this was not a court of inquiry. "You are from Partha, are you not?"

"Yes, sir, that is my home planet." came the prompt reply.

"Just why did you apply for the Academy? I found no record of any other Parthan in Starfleet." Spock noted the quick veiling of expression.

A shrug, a fleeting smile. "There's always a first, isn't there, sir?" Shaledek pushed his chair back and got to his feet, pacing around the room. "My people have stayed in our own solar system for centuries -- as you no doubt know -- because the LAW says to avoid contact with outsiders." Coming to a halt close to Spock, the ensign glanced over his shoulder before continuing. "I can say no more, Commander. To break my vow would be to invite... retribution." The handsome face now held a shuttered look.

"The Captain is merely interested in the Parthan trade agreement with Sanctus... at present. He has no desire to violate any vow you may have taken." Spock felt a small twinge of sympathy, having been on the receiving end of countless human interrogations about his home world. He glanced around the room, seeing the sleek neutrality of the walls, the cold perfection of angle and curve; mathematically sound, but esthetically without beauty. For some time now, he had wondered if that was why the humans grew so restless on a long flight. Not just humans, he admitted belatedly, for he had seen Andorians pale and shrivel up under long confinement. Even he found himself looking forward to contact with land, with the life each planet gave off through its very soil. What was Sanctus like? What made the MORS seek it above all other places?

"Mister Spock?" Shaledek was standing next to the Vulcan, eyes wide. Spock realized he must have been speaking.

"I cannot give you much in the way of information about those pacts, sir. But I can tell you that our ships are fast and very profitable. My father was a navigator before he..." There was an awkward pause while Shaledek sought the correct word. Not finding it, he merely stared at the Vulcan.

Spock mustered what little patience he could, wishing that Kirk would show up and take over this distasteful job. Prying into the lives of others came so naturally to the eternally curious humans. "I am sorry to cause you pain, Ensign. What is needed is some information about the Sanctans... have you ever seen any of that race?"

The Parthan was growing visibly more agitated. "What need have you of that information?" he whispered. "I cannot discuss them; the LAW forbids my doing so... I am as yet not an elder." He looked longingly toward the door as if planning to escape. His well-muscled body tensed as he met the science officer's gaze. "I have never seen a Sanctan, sir. Only the Brothers have that privilege."

"Do the Brothers come to Partha, then? Who is responsible for carrying out this LAW of yours?" He was getting nowhere, and knowing that Kirk was going to be upset did Spock no good at all.

To his astonishment, Shaledek smiled ruefully, and nodded. "Yes, I saw a Brother, but only once. The LAW permits the parting." He sat down, searching the older man's face. "You are Vulcan... this must be difficult for you."

"Yes," Spock said quietly, aware that at last the Parthan had lost his fear. "My people find no pleasure in such crude inquiries as this." He noticed once again the aura of energy that seemed to surround this intense young man. A sudden thought glimmered, then flared into illumination. "You are linked with the Sanctans, are you not?" He waited, wondering what his question would arouse in the way of responses.

A huge load seemed to slip from Shaledek's shoulders, and he smiled once again. "Yes, Commander, we are. But not as you imagine one race is linked to another. I am but the first stage of Parthan development; there are two others."

Spock nodded, now certain he was on the right track. "The second stage is the Brothers, is it not? And the third....?" Was he correct, and if so, how would this knowledge aid McCoy? He wanted to share the information with Kirk, but knew that he must show no sign of impatience now.

"MORS... as you have guessed," came the steady answer. "I am here because one of us needs aid... and cannot reach Sanctus without it."

"Are you not violating your LAW?" asked Spock, feeling that he was watching someone who suddenly no longer appeared real. "Why have you spoken of these things now?"

"The LAW is within each of us and we must interpret it as best we can. Trusting you will not violate its tenets. However, I may not discuss Sanctus, nor may I explain why I was sent to the Enterprise." Shaledek looked somberly at the Vulcan, obviously waiting for another question. His curly hair and fresh coloring lent him a look of extreme youth.

"How old are you, Ensign? How long do your people live? Do they all go to Sanctus?" Deep down, Spock expected the Parthan to maintain silence, yet a small hope

refused to die. For McCoy, so that his impending death will have meaning. He rubbed his hand over one pantleg, the room was too cool for his own comfort.

"I am young -- by our standards -- only two hundred and nine winters. Some of us die after... many centuries. Others live forever. That is all I may tell you. Please, may I leave? Commander Scott will have me on report." Shaledek gazed imploringly at his interrogator.

"There is something else I must ask, Ensign, and you may respond in a way that will not break your LAW. Nevertheless, I must know one thing, have you been in contact with Doctor McCoy?"

The veiled look was back, and the Parthan drew himself up, his features carefully schooled. "We have spoken," he admitted finally.

"It is important that the Captain knows about your conversation," Spock said carefully. "As you are no doubt aware, humans become deeply attached to one another, and thus are concerned for the welfare of their friends. Doctor McCoy is not only the Chief Medical Officer, but he and the Captain share a deep friendship." Spock was on guard now, waiting to see if his words had had the wished-for effect on the younger man.

The response was not what he had expected, for the Parthan's expression softened, and an understanding glimmered in the intelligent eyes. In a gentle tone, he said, "None of you must worry... for he will never suffer pain or sorrow again. Happiness and love are now his for eternity... this is the LAW."

"Yet these gifts are obtained at the price of the Doctor's life!" Spock retorted. "Most sentient beings cherish their memories -- good and bad -- for they are vital to our knowledge and understanding of life. MORS, by its action, is in effect stealing the Doctor's mind, replacing it with delusions that bear no truth." The enormity of that loss stirred the Vulcan as worse than death, and he got to his feet, facing down the puzzled Parthan. Touching his forehead, Spock said, "This brain, this repository of facts and emotions... without our memories all our experiences are rendered meaningless. In your various stages of metamorphosis do you retain what has been learned? Is each life a separate experience? Can you tell me what happens to you?"

"Commander Spock, let me ease your concerns, for I perceive your distaste... and can see how truly alien we must appear."

The wide brow wrinkled as Shaledek strove to make himself understood. "I am young, with only my own memories to guide me. When it becomes time to evolve -- as a Brother or Sister -- then I'll be permitted to share in the accumulated knowledge of the Brothers of Antronius. All that I learn will be retained until my next change." The broad shoulders shrugged in acceptance as he smiled ruefully. "If I am fortunate to find a companion to share the last life with, then the secrets of the universe will be mine."

"Quickly, Ensign," Spock said, "tell me why the choices are primarily humans... and physicians? The need to know is imperative." The science officer could see the beginnings of fear returning and he had still so much to learn.

"Terrans? But so few are chosen, what do you mean?" The gaze cleared, and Shaledek nodded. "Oh, of course, because of him. I cannot give you all of the answers, but from what I have heard the bonding is not voluntary. It is decided by the LAW, just which race is chosen. I do not know why McCoy." He stiffened, his features suddenly

contorted in dismay. "Shh! Partha forgive me! What have I done?" He cowered as if to ward off an unseen adversary, gazing wildly around the room. "MORS!" he hissed, "it comes for me... I have disobeyed the LAW!"

At first Spock neither felt nor heard anything. Then, as his own senses sharpened, he was aware of a change in the atmosphere... a charging, a surging of energy accompanied by the sharp odor of ozone.

"You must not leave here, yet," he commanded, "I believe that MORS is in the corridor." Quickly he opened the door, seeing only two crewmembers walking toward the lift. The odor was already fading. Satisfied, Spock turned to speak to the Parthan, and did not see him. "Shaledek? The corridor appears empty. Apparently MORS is not..." The toe of a booted foot, barely visible, moved slightly, catching the Vulcan's eye, and he moved swiftly to the alien's side.

The Parthan lay sprawled on the floor, face down, twitching slightly, while all around him was a shimmering, blue light. Here, the smell was intense, stinging the Vulcan's nostrils.

Shaledek was still alive, though, and Spock turned him gently over, watching as the dark lashes flickered, then the eyelids raised to an expression of absolute horror... and impending death.

One hand clawed at Spock's shoulder, "You... must speak... Doctor this night." The lids closed, and Spock's arms involuntarily tightened around the hard body. As if aware of the Vulcan, Shaledek roused enough to murmur, "MORS... I was... arrange... contact with... Sanctus. Nowtoolatetoolate... kill..."

There was no time for a peaceful ushering out of the Parthan's soul. Spock gripped the ensign's arms tighter, shaking him as he commanded the Parthan to respond. "Who is going to kill? You must tell me! You must think of the crew! Your loyalty is to this ship -- to Starfleet! Speak!"

Head falling back, lungs gasping for air, Shaledek sighed, then in barely audible tones said, "You... must speak... with Doctor! MORS... destroy.... all." The body went limp, and the aura flared, then dimmed, finally disappearing entirely.

Instinctively, Spock held the alien to him, only placing the still figure on the floor when he was certain all vestiges of life were gone. Gazing down at the composed features, he thought fleetingly of being an alien, of the probability of dying a death such as Shaledek had. Did Partha have burial customs that required immediate disposal of the body? Had the ensign forfeited his right to life because of his need to speak to another? He rose to his feet, face grave, and summoned M'Benga on the intercom. Looking back once more on the murdered crewman, his resolve hardened. As he waited near the Conference Room door for the physician, he shut down all emotions, concentrating on the task before him. It would be up to Kirk to decide just what to do next, but Spock knew that tonight, as the Enterprise raced through the star fields, he would at last challenge MORS.

Kirk's reaction had been as expected. Upon hearing about the Parthan's fate, he had doubled the security on his staff officers, then gone directly to sickbay to see Shaledek's body.

M'Benga, still working on his log after the autopsy, looked up in surprise. "Sorry to be late with my results, sir, but..."

The Captain's hand silenced him. "No time, M'Benga. What killed him?" His even features were grim, the hazel eyes glinting with anger.

The African shrugged, "Insofar as my examination was cursory, and the results far from satisfactory... I'd say he was killed by lightning."

That broke Kirk's control. He glared at the physician, "Not funny! Electrocuted is what you actually mean. Correct me if I'm wrong." His tone was curt, the words clipped.

"You are incorrect, sir," came back M'Benga's retort. "When I said lightning, I meant lightning! And a very selective charge of energy, too." He stood his ground, impressive, dignified, and obviously not intimidated by the Captain's anger.

"I don't understand, M'Benga. Spock said that Shaledek spoke to him, told him that MORS was going to kill everybody. Doesn't a person die immediately if struck by a bolt of lightning?"

The grizzled head shook, then the physician moved over to where the Parthan lay covered by a drape. Pulling it back, he gestured for the Captain to come closer. With capable hands he parted the thick hair on the Parthan's scalp. There, almost hidden, was a small hole with grey-blue edges. "Lightning... passing almost entirely through the system, yet not going to ground. Not only that, but the charge — which I call it for lack of a better term — was also highly selective."

Bewildered, Kirk could only stare, "Are you saying that MORS was able to 'place' and control just where the energy went? To use it as a weapon? My God, man, do you realize what you are saying?"

This time M'Benga nodded. "Yes, sir, I do. But there is no other explanation. That thing has grown powerful enough to act as a lethal weapon... still maintaining, of course, its hold on Len. It seems, Captain, that our fellow traveller can use its energy with laser precision... and who or what the next target will be, who knows?" M'Benga dropped the cover, and he and Kirk left the darkened room. "Spock told me of Shaledek's last words. He must contact McCoy... and try to get him to persuade MORS not to harm anyone else." Grief shone in the dark eyes. "What can I do, Captain, in the meantime? There is no drug I can administer to Len that MORS cannot nullify. Its power is too great. But we must reach whatever part of Len's mind that's left..."

For a moment the Captain stood with his hand on the door frame, body slumped in despair. This was not the kind of battle that sharpened the senses, that put officers and crew into that strange, euphoric mindset where the only goal was to destroy the enemy... no matter the cost. In this battle, one of his dearest friends was also the adversary... and nobody was going to win.

"Captain? Please, there's little enough time as it is." The tall figure of the African, face showing his concern, blocked the curious from noticing their leader's anxiety. "Can I get you something, sir?"

Kirk gathered his control about him, meeting the dark eyes frankly. "When this is over, M'Benga, you can give me something that'll let me sleep for a month. But right

now I need my wits -- and pain. You go on. Oh, and thanks." For a long moment they gazed at one another, physician and captain, sharing the loss and the need. Then, without comment, each went his own way. As Kirk walked toward the transporter room he felt his spirits lift, perhaps there was a chance for Spock to contact Bones and discover just what hope -- if any -- there might be. He imagined the alien as a parasite, feeding on the tiny reserve of energy that kept McCoy alive. Well, perhaps Scotty's genius could come up with a bit of a surprise for MORS. He saw the sturdy figure of his chief engineer, and nodded. "Mister Scott," he said solemnly, "I have a question or two to ask you."

"Aye, at your service, Captain. After wha' that de'il did to my ensign, I've an axe or two t'grind, myself."

There was such a fierce light in Scotty's eyes that Kirk had to smile. The fight was not over so long as men like this existed -- men who never gave up. With Spock and Scotty, surely the three of them could give that damnable creature a battle for McCoy! "I want to know if the transporter beam..."

For Spock there was no beginning or end; kneeling, eyes closed against outside distractions, the Vulcan sought only that inner self which could lead to understanding. He had knelt, thus, for several hours, neither sensing the passing of time nor caring of that passing. The peace he sought was not the peace of reflective self-examination, rather the deeper peace -- a place untouched -- where any intrusion would be absorbed into his very being, would become one with him. This was the place he hoped to contact McCoy, for it was a selective section of his mind, and if the barriers he erected held, then MORS would not be able to violate their meeting. He had no memory of anyone save Kirk admitted there; perhaps T'Pau, never T'Pring. It was where the Vulcan touched souls with another. It was the place of Chaylet'k. He began to breathe erratically, hands fisting, then splayed against his thighs. Suddenly, his eyes flew open and he sighed. Rising to his feet, he went to his locker, drawing out a black robe with a hood. As he dressed, his mind remained shuttered to all around him, so that when he left his cabin he saw none of the bemused glances that rested on him, then quickly looked away.

He comes. Shall I slay him, my one? For he will cause you pain -- much pain this night. His death will take but a moment.

No! I forbid it! His death is against my LAW... and the memory of it would not be erased from my heart. Give us time -- just a little time -- he has great need to reach me, as does my captain.

Your wish will be considered, my one. He will die if I decide it -- as did the one named Sh'l'd'k. The LAW gives me that right.

McCoy got to his feet, pressing his fingers to his temples. In effect, he was trying to block off the whispering voice which spoke so calmly of other people's deaths. He had known about the young Parthan almost as soon as the deed was done -- had felt grief for one instant, then the knowledge had been erased -- or so MORS thought. But it had come back -- to McCoy's relief -- and he had told the alien that such horrors could not be removed from the human soul. MORS had listened, and grown very still.

He went to his liquor stand, pouring himself a glass of chilled water, filling it once again, draining it to the last drop. Then, imbued with a sense of the inevitable, he went to his wardrobe and selected a loose-fitting garment given to him by Uhura. He smiled, thinking of that lovely, keen-witted woman. What a fine leader she would make! He pictured her as captain of her own starship, commanding with a mixture of shrewd decisiveness and common sense. Quickly he shed his uniform, ignoring his bone-thin frame, the blue aura that he took for granted now. The robe was light, giving him a freedom of movement he enjoyed. He ran his finger down the front of it, eyebrow arching when he felt the variations in the weave. Shades of blue, shades of black and silvery grey, it was a thing of marvelous craftsmanship -- and esthetically he knew it would please the fastidious Spock.

Spock! There was only one reason the First Officer would make an appearance this late at night. Sent by Kirk, no doubt. The tingle of excitement he felt was tempered by caution. He must not allow MORS to sense his hatred of the idea of mind-melding. It was his one chance to pass on what he had learned from the alien who was slowly sapping his strength, his very life. He bent over the sink, washing his face, combing his hair, knowing that MORS' preoccupation with meeting the Vulcan had allowed the glimpse into reality. McCoy stared hard at his face, seeing the skin stretched taut over cheekbones, his nose more a beak than a mere piece of flesh. His eyes were the giveaway, and he turned away, seeing in the depths his very soul... and the glimmerings of a fine madness. At one time he would have cried -- had done so -- but tears came seldom now, and the question that brought the rush of fevered color to his cheeks was Spock's survival. The Vulcan had to live!

Impulsively, McCoy took down the small box containing his daughter's shoe, placing it on the desk in plain sight. Spock would see to his request, the thing that had to be done should he die -- or leave in a hurry. The humor of that last image brought a smile to his face, and he left the bathroom, going to his sitting room with eager steps. He felt the surge of adrenaline, sending him hurrying to straighten up his quarters for his guest.

When the soft tapping came, he was so busy that he barely heard it. "Spock!" he said, when the door slip open, "good to see you." He exchanged a long look with the Vulcan, realizing that the science officer had no way of knowing that MORS had anticipated this visit. Shrugging, he led the way to two comfortable chairs. "We certainly look relaxed, don't we?" he commented wryly.

The faraway look in Spock's eyes cleared, and for the first time he spoke. "It seems, Doctor, that you are not unprepared for my visit."

McCoy's hand lightly brushed that of the Vulcan. "I have the advantage, Spock." He said softly. "Sort of like the ability to see around corners. Then, again," he spread his fingers, palm up, "who needs that talent most of the time?" He saw the lines of caring etched deeply on the smooth Vulcan skin. "How's Jim? And the rest of the crew?" Doubts assailed him. Was MORS only allowing this contact for a moment or two -- letting him remember how sweet it was to speak to his own kind -- and when was this to end?



"They are well, Doctor... "

"Please. Call... call me Bones -- or McCoy -- or Len... just say my name."

The dark eyes were like obsidian, their gaze hypnotic in the somber features. "I understand, McCoy."

"But that's not why you're here, is it?" McCoy prompted. His glance drifted over the black-clad Vulcan, eyes widening when he saw the IDIC pendant around Spock's neck. He nodded, thoughtful, and spoke carefully. "MORS is in a dangerous mood; wants to destroy you. I can't let you risk your life."

Spock merely nodded his understanding. "Your concern is appreciated, Doc... McCoy, but since the death of Shaledek, the safety of the Enterprise may be at stake. Were you aware at the time that he was going to be killed?" There was no curiosity or reproach in the Vulcan's tone. The question was a rhetorical one.

"Regretfully, almost immediately thereafter. Then it was erased -- for a time." Excitement shook his frame and he sat upright as he locked glances with his old friend. "MORS tried to erase his death, Spock, but the memory came back. I told it that such actions were contrary to my LAW. Maybe, just maybe, that'll give it something to consider."

Spock, glance narrowing, was slow to reply. As he sat with the gaunt physician, he saw what he dreaded the most, that faint, glimmering effect around the physician's body. "May I dim the lights?" he asked calmly, wishing there was no need for even this slight deception.

In answer, McCoy got to his feet and flicked the switch, plunging the room into what should have been total darkness. The faint blue aura became more intense, and Spock knew that the alien was already there.

McCoy knew it, too, and he sighed deeply. "Spock," he began, "I don't know how much longer I'll be rational... if this meld is all we have to work with, then of course it must be done. I hope you're feeling very strong tonight." Wordlessly he extended his hand, and it was grasped between the steely fingers and held in a crushing grip, each man conveying worlds of never-spoken emotions. "God bless you, my friend," the Doctor murmured finally. "I'm ready." He closed his eyes, and tried to relax. There was a moment's impression of warm fingers at his temple, then nothing.

There was no gentle entry into the corridors of McCoy's mind: rather, Spock had the sensation of being sucked down into a vortex of frigid water... a sensation of utter cold, and white light. Never before had such an experience occurred. When he had finished whirling, when the centrifuge of light and liquid had slowed, he lay sprawled in a tunnel, completely disoriented. Where he had come to expect a meeting -- a sharing of thoughts -- he found none. Instead, he was alone, not even hearing the beat of blood through the vessels in the brain.

CAN YOU HEAR ME, MCCOY?

VULCAN! YOU SEEK TO DESTROY MY ONE... FOR THAT I SHOULD KILL YOU!

Spock shuddered at the thunderous tone. He was silent, not wishing to invoke more of that terrible anger upon himself. He began reconstructing his weakened barriers, gaining confidence when there was nothing else heard from the alien. The glaring light began to fade, and Spock thought he sensed a flicker of red as he drifted through the unrecognizable mazes of the brain. Nothing called to him, no thought snagged at his probing consciousness. Dared he call the Doctor again? He let himself become as smoke, seeing his tiny form drift, wraithlike, into the silent passages. Had there been memories here at one time? Was that where he was, drifting through the empty fields of McCoy's past? He sought to attain formlessness, watching as that ghost-shape turned to energy, darting like a will-o-the-wisp into the convoluted brain. He was fascinated, for never before had he SEEN himself, never before had there been any awareness of what went on. Yet, he knew that MORS allowed this, was playing with his mind, and so far, he had achieved nothing.

Spock! This way.... come, here I am.

AH, DOCTOR, IT... IS A RELIEF TO KNOW YOU HAVE SURVIVED.

There was the faintest awareness of a chuckle, a flaring of the tiny red light. Spock tried to get closer to it, without success. What he was conscious of was another presence which seemed to be erected impenetrable barriers. He felt a sense of despair, of loss, and the glowing light was gone.

MORTAL! LEAVE US NOW... MORS GROWS WEARY OF YOUR PUNY ATTEMPT TO JOIN WITH MY ONE!

YOU ARE THE ONE WHO IS AFRAID, MORS. FOR ALL YOUR POWER YOU KNOW THAT McCOY IS CONTENT WITH HIS OWN KIND. IT IS YOU WHO BRING HIM THE GREATEST PAIN. Spock felt the vibration of energy, the flaring of light as he dared challenge this all-powerful alien. He risked another challenge. IF YOU ARE NOT FEARFUL OF MY 'PUNY' ATTEMPTS, THEN LET ME MELD WITH YOUR 'ONE.' IS NOT HIS HAPPINESS YOUR CONCERN?

FOR THIS MOMENT ONLY, VULCAN. AND BECAUSE YOU DO NOT LIE. BUT CAUSE MY ONE ANGUISH, AND MORS WILL RIP YOUR MIND FROM YOUR BODY AS EASILY AS YOU TAKE BREATH!

Spock's response was to cease his protests. He felt a curious calm, and saw once again the faint glimmer of light. Still, he was intensely aware that not once had he actually intercepted any of McCoy's thoughts.

Spock! Here, I'm here... just a little farther...

Like a flickering candle, the glow and warmth of the words guided the Vulcan to his goal. There was a feeling of vertigo for the briefest of moments and then they were truly one. Gone was the tiny figure, lost in icy limbo, instead he was surrounded and upheld by concern and joy. So powerful was the emotion that Spock tried to back away.

No! Wait! I'm sorry, Spock, I forgot how this must seem to you.

THERE IS NO NEED TO APOLOGIZE. I AM AWARE OF THE TREMENDOUS NEED. YOU UNDERSTAND WHY I AM INTRUDING? Again, Spock sensed the chuckle, humor rising like a warm sun, flooding him, seeking all the frozen sections of his body.

There's no dread this time, Spock. You must take what I know to Jim, and make plans. I don't think MORS wants to kill anyone else — except you, for daring to be here, but why it murdered Shaledek is beyond me...

There was an overwhelming sense of grief, of guilt — a mood so grey that tears slid down Spock's cheeks, mingling with McCoy's. Indeed, the emotion was so intense that the Vulcan began pulling away, aware that such sorrow might cause MORS to fulfill its threat.

No! Don't go. There's not much time. I'm never sure anymore just where I am, Spock. MORS keeps me returning to my childhood. Please, stay.

I AM HERE, McCOY. BUT YOU MUST CONCENTRATE SO THAT I CAN REACH THOSE PLACES WHERE YOU HAVE STORED MORS' PLANS. RELAX... I AM YOUR FRIEND.

Abruptly, Spock was enveloped in shadows; seeing or hearing nothing for the second time. There was no chill here, no pervading sense of doom, he was merely seeking something to take back to Jim. At the thought of the Captain, a light flickered, orange, infinitesimal... yet a beacon to illuminate the darkness. He concentrated harder, thinking of Kirk with almost single-minded tenacity. The name was the key... and for the sake of James Kirk, he was admitted to that special chamber, to be once again immersed in the warmth of human emotions.

LCDR. Leonard McCoy, reporting for duty, sir. Why, thank you, sir, I'd be honored to join you...

Spock tried to erect a few barriers, to effect some control over this intensely private storehouse. But, led on by the physician's urgings, he saw just how unique Jim's and McCoy's relationship had been. To share in those moments when each human revealed heartbreak or unrelenting grief, made Spock see how closely the human interwove all parts of his life with those around him. Perhaps that was why physicians were so highly sought... more than any other group, they shared those deeply private moments.

McCOY, WE MUST BE QUICK, OR NEITHER OF US WILL REMEMBER WHAT IS TO HAPPEN.

Sorry, Spock, but I needed to remember. Now, here's what I know... or — what MORS has shared with me. I don't think it's aware of my loyalty to the Enterprise.

WHY DO YOU SAY THAT? I WOULD ASSUME MORS WOULD ACCEPT IT AS SUCH.

Well, if it were, I'm certain that all those memories would be wiped out, too. That's the hell of it... so many recollections are gone.

PERHAPS, IF I WAS PART OF THEM, MY OWN MEMORIES CAN BE SUPERIMPOSED. DO YOU WISH TO TRY... ?

No, they're gone, and we don't have time to rediscover what's been destroyed. What I can give you are the coordinates for Sanctus, and the 'password' that'll make the Brothers contact you. Ready?

YES. JIM WILL BE PLEASED. HE IS DETERMINED TO FOLLOW WHATEVER STEPS ARE NECESSARY TO... TO GIVE YOU PEACE. I APOLOGIZE, MCCOY, I KNOW OF NO OTHER WAY TO CONVEY MY FEELINGS.

It's all right, Spock. I understand. Now, have Jim set the Enterprise on a straight line to Partha. At Warp Five that should take only six earth days. There's a small cluster of moonlets around Partha and you'll have to find Number Four — don't ask me, but that's what I got out of poor Shaledok. Plot the orbit of that moon and then lay a course 45 degrees due south. Sanctus lies somewhere about an eighth of a parsec from there. Damn close to the Rimworlds, from what I can figure. As far away from civilization as they could get.

IT WOULD SEEM SO... AND THE PASSWORD? WE MUST HURRY, DOCTOR, I CAN SENSE SOMETHING... DISTURBING.

Hmm, wait! MORS is coming back... damn! Uh, now what was that word? Or was it a phrase? Spock! I can't remember... help me... think about Shaledok... help me get it back. Yes... that's the way. I've got it! Memorize this, quick! CH'RLK T'NAU S TRN'LKTN... damn, sounds as bad as Vulcan. I'm not certain but I think it means This Life Is Eternal... Spock? I don't think I want to live forever.

CH'RLK T'NAU S TRN'LKTN. I WILL REMEMBER, MY FRIEND.

Wait, there's one more favor I want from you — and it's a big one. There's a box on my desk, a small one. Will you see that it's beamed down with me — if I forget to take it?

IT WILL BE DONE. WE MUST BID ONE ANOTHER GOOD-BYE NOW... I CAN FEEL THE DISTURBANCE EVEN MORE STRONGLY. THERE ARE NO WORDS — IN ANY LANGUAGE TO CONVEY MY ADMIRATION — OR AFFECTION FOR YOU. WE HAVE BEEN FRIENDS... IN THE NOBLEST SENSE OF THE WORD. I WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER YOU WITH...

Don't say it! I know what pain this sort of thing causes you. God! You know I would kill myself — if I thought this nightmare would end with my death. Oh, Spock, I leave it to you to tell the others how I feel. Heaven help me... it's so hard to let go....

There was no warning. Spock felt the strands of his mind which were linked with the Doctor's ripped away. All about him was that unbearable white void, and he was falling... falling...

BETRAYER! MURDERER! YOU HAVE HURT MY ONE! NOW KNOW THE POWER OF MORS!!!

Someone was screaming, pleading for help, for mercy, but Spock could not see them. He was once again deep in the empty passages of McCoy's mind — he thought. Yet, here and there, he caught glimpses of shadowy figures that seemed vaguely familiar. The screaming had stopped, or at least he could not hear it any longer and for that he was grateful. He placed his hands on one of the glistening walls, aware that he was watching himself as he had at first. But this time something was different. His hands slid down the slickness; it was icy-cold and soft brain tissue — and to his warped imagination the walls were ten feet tall. MORS, no doubt trying to drive him mad... But he was Vulcan, and such games terrified him not at all. Besides, here in McCoy's mind, there was nothing to fear, for the physician would not allow the alien to

destroy him. All he had to do was pretend to be confused and MORS would soon tire of this charade.

He sent his thoughts further along, seeking to probe the cells for anything that could lend him an idea of where he was. That there were barriers to his probing surprised him... he had not been aware that McCoy had such abilities. Concentrating harder, he willed himself to pass through that chill wall, and was successful.

Spock! There is no one who has been to Vermana. It is merely a legend set in the dim past. Why do you persist with that line of questioning?

Spock, your mother is human, therefore subject to certain ah... emotional storms. You must perfect your Vulcan control....

He was in a vast cavern of grey matter, the walls hard and unyielding, the ceiling bristling with sharp-tipped protuberances resembling stalactites. Surely, he was not back in McCoy's mind! Yet, who else knew so much about him? He went further into the dim recesses of this place, seeing nothing save an ever-increasing number of the dangerous projections. Confused, he half-expected MORS to thunder out at him; indeed, alone in this cavern, he would welcome almost any intruder.

You must remember, Spock, that Vulcans are a superior race, having purchased that superiority at a large cost. Logic, my son, that is where all.....

The chill that swept through Spock shook him to the core as he realized what MORS had done to him. He had been thrust into his own mind! Turned inward to relive his past! Why? Where was the logic of it? He forced himself to stay calm, to examine these ghostly memories for what they were. This grey cavern was his childhood, pierced through with the arrows of logic his tutors and elders had aimed his way. In vain did he search for the memories of his sehlat, his favorite hideaway. Somehow, somewhere. Had they been lost, buried as unworthy simply because they had brought him a measure of happiness? He leaned his head against the wall, accepting the cold, forcing his iron will to hold back his sorrow. The truth of this prison was its loneliness — much as his own childhood had been lonely. Walking slowly toward a small opening, he caught sight of a flash of gold and began hurrying toward it.

Spock? Darling what are you doing sitting in the dark? Oh, that's my boy. Never mind it's broken... I'll see that it's mended. What? Of course, I'm not disappointed... I love you. Here, sit in my lap and I'll read to you about Tom Sawyer. Remember him? Well, he was a little bit older than you are, and always in hot water. No dear, not literally in hot water....

He was enfolded in warmth, captured in a pair of loving arms which encircled his body, and brought him peace. In all his recollections of his mother, this one was the strongest. There was no logic to her actions, and even now, he experienced a faint sense of guilt at his weakness. But oh, the loving touch had meant so much to him then. Gazing around, he could see other pin pricks of that golden light, and he smiled, momentarily remembering his childhood on Vulcan.

THINK YOU THIS IS WHERE MORS WOULD DWELL WITH HIS ONE? THINK YOU THIS PLACE OF SADNESS AND DECEIT IS WORTHY OF MORS? THESE MEMORIES ARE BUT A TOMB, VULCAN, AND IF MY ONE WOULD ALLOW IT YOU WOULD BE SEALED WITHIN ITS WALLS!

MORS! THERE IS NO LOGIC TO YOUR ACTIONS. MY DEATH WILL CAUSE MCCOY MUCH DISTRESS AND PAIN. YOU ARE THE ONE WHO DECEIVES HIM.

Once again Spock was ripped from the contact, mind hurtling across a void of endless gloom. Senses reeling, he sought to establish contact, and failed. Had MORS thrust him into someone else's mind? If so, whose? He began examining this new arena -- that was the first thought that sprung to mind -- and found it more disturbing than the last. Where there had been vast space, here were narrow, labyrinthine corridors. He could not see past a few feet in any direction, and the atmosphere was musty. The sudden flare of activity was more of a ripple in dark water. Still, desperate, he reached for it.

Your argument falls apart, S'tel, because there is a flaw in your logic. You have approached the problem much as a human might -- or far more to the point -- as a Klingon in the final stages of battle.

Spock wrenched away, breaking the contact. He was still in his own mind! MORS had merely flung him forward, to relive the days at the Vulcan Academy. Had he really been that arrogant? He felt shame, thinking about his cutting remarks to the younger cadet. Yet his elders had heaped praises upon him for his flawless presentation. He began walking toward one of the high-walled corridors, seeking more of the rippling impulses. Here, in this place, he had found satisfaction for his hard work. Today I would present to you the words of Stehl'rn, who was, as you know, one of Vulcan's leading and most honored philosophers. He said, upon observing the birth of his first son, "In this one moment, I have joined the gods." Yet, three years later, he set that same child upon the mountain peak of T'renzykh to die. Were his actions logical? Did they contradict his words? I say to you that they were logical, and he was being true to his credo: If a thing is perfect when conceived but later proves to be flawed, then by destroying that imperfection, the idea of perfection is restored...

He broke away, aghast at the hard, mocking sound of his voice. That was not the way he had intended his presentation....

No. He would tap this vault once again, if only to prove his point. The corridor was narrower, growing more restricted as he touched -- and rejected -- some of the shadowy contacts. Then, without warning, he was once again deep in memory: Shh! It is unseemly to appear superior to the humans. Yet, I put it to you, Sakel, how can anyone not see the Vulcans as superior? What I want from them, and it will be difficult to attain, is an appointment to Starfleet. I should have no problem, once I have been accepted, as I will easily master....

He broke the contact, remembering his self-confidence, his rather contemptuous dismissal of the requirements for admission. Now, reliving that moment, he understood all too well why Vulcans were not popular as cadets. He also recalled that the courses had been far more difficult than he had anticipated.

And yet, he had made friends with a few of the other cadets. They had accepted him far more easily than he had expected. Even defended him to others, something that was never done on his home world. Curious, he turned back, selecting another of the maze-like paths. He concentrated for a moment, then felt himself absorbed into... a hell with gibbering shapes which whirled and leaped about, stretching until they became gobbets of flame that burnt white-hot, then were snuffed out by some unseen force. Even in death their shrieks rose and fell, the calls of the damned, the unforgiven... where was he?

THIS IS WHAT AWAITS YOU AT THE END OF YOUR LIFE, VULCAN! FOR HERE DWELL THE ARROGANT, THE UNGIVING. THIS PLACE IS IN YOUR OWN MIND... AND MY ONE KNOWS OF ITS EXISTENCE! MORS WISHES TO LEAVE YOU HERE FOR A THOUSAND TURNS OF WORLD. FEEL MY ANGER!

The flames leaped higher, blue-white now, and chill as ice. Spock fell back, hands covering his eyes, trying desperately to break the contact with the vengeful alien. A crushing weight on his chest made breathing difficult, and he knew that this madness was real. There seemed to be an unseen hand crushing the life from him... he was dying. McCOY! HELP... ME... MUST NOT DIE THIS WAY. TELL MORS... McCOY!

Spock! My God, what happened? MORS! This is forbidden... I will die with my friend... you MUST not do this thing. I forbid it. MORS!

The voice became gentler, soothing, coaxing, as McCoy bargained for Spock. Dimly, the Vulcan became aware of the sound of his labored breathing, the crowing inspirations that brought air to his lungs. He was propped up, held in a pair of thin arms, clasped tightly to the physician's chest, the aura around McCoy so bright he had to look away. "It's all right, Spock, 'as all right." One hand slipped from holding the Vulcan, then the other. The dark head bent, and slowly the Doctor slumped over the still body of his friend. "Take us to Sanctus. I'm too tired to fight anymore."

"No! You must not die!... You have to hold on. Please." Spock struggled to his feet, head pounding, hands grasping to hold McCoy off the floor. Calling on all his extra strength, he gathered the unconscious man into his arms and made for sickbay. However, before he had reached the end of the long corridor, he fell to his knees, still clutching the body of his friend. A weariness such as he had never known forced him to relinquish his burden. With his last bit of strength, Spock lifted McCoy's head from the deck of the ship, resting it on his arm. He had failed Kirk, had failed McCoy, and worse, had placed over four hundred lives in jeopardy. By challenging MORS, he had accomplished only death for the crew, and insanity for himself. As he drifted into unconscious, he remembered McCoy's words. "CH'RLK T'NAU S TRN'LKTN" he murmured. Not logical, really, for no life was forever....

There was no sound in sickbay save for the restless pacing of booted feet. Ten paces; pause, then ten more paces. To the people working in the ward, the Captain's restless movements had long since ceased to disturb them. Chapel, monitoring McCoy's vital signs, merely gazed sympathetically at the man. Her back ached from long hours bent over the two men who lay side by side, and she felt as if she hadn't closed her eyes in a week. It had actually only been two days, but with Spock's endless chanting of some alien — probably Vulcan — prayer, and the Doctor's emaciated figure lying so still she kept checking for life signs, she had assigned herself to their care for as long as it took. M'Benga, catnapping on the next bed, was grey with fatigue... and she wondered grimly if he would be her next patient.

The footsteps came closer and a pair of hazel eyes met hers. "Any change?" Kirk's voice was hoarse.

"None. I wish I knew what Spock was muttering, though. It may be something needed for his recovery." She managed a very small smile, "You know how he is about his own treatment."

Glance softening, Kirk nodded. His strong hands gripped the foot of the bed, "What happened to them? Did MORS try to kill them both? That doesn't make sense!"

Chapel held up her hand, eyes wide. "Wait! I think Spock's rallying. Let me give him a shot of Stimulin. Will you watch him for me?" She moved away, quickly leaving the room to prepare the medication.

Kirk settled himself beside the stirring Vulcan, concentrating fiercely on the mutterings which now sounded hopelessly garbled. To Spock's right, McCoy lay unmoving, his features closed off as he dreamt of some other world. The Captain felt his anger rise, and instinctively he reached out to grasp Spock's hand, wrapping his fingers tight to the Vulcan's. "Spock! It's Jim. You're in sickbay, we're all here. Come on, man, don't leave us like this."

Chapel was back, her blonde hair slightly disarrayed, her cheeks flushed as she leaned over to administer the shot. There was the familiar hiss, and she laid aside the syringe, now critically watching the monitors. "Good. See, Captain? His heart rate and blood pressure are moving apart." A wide smile appeared. "Trouble for humans, but normal for our Vulcan. He'll be awake very soon."

The change was remarkable. No sooner had she spoken than two very dark eyes opened, focussed and looked at them both. However, it was to the Captain that his glance returned, his fingers tightening convulsively around Kirk's. "Captain! McCoy?" He coughed, cheeks red with exertion, then he struggled to sit up, carefully removing his hand from the Captain's.

"Right next to you, Spock. Hasn't regained consciousness. We... we've been worried."

Nodding, Spock got off the bed, and padded over to where the Doctor lay. "He saved my life, but there's very little time left. We must get to Partha... I have the coordinates. It will take us six standard days as it is... " he glanced sharply at Kirk. "What is it? What is wrong?"

"Spock," began Kirk gently, "you've been unconscious for two days. If time is so critical, we may not make it. Perhaps the best thing to do is to keep our heading for Star Base Nine." He joined his First Officer by McCoy's bedside. "M'Benga seems to think that MORS will keep him alive -- in a coma -- until we can rendezvous with the Sanctans. Did you get that impression?"

There was a long silence before Spock responded. "MORS will destroy whatever it has to in order to save itself -- and McCoy. The problem has become the fact that McCoy thinks that MORS killed me... or is still trying to... and he's given up. His last words were for me to 'take him to Sanctus,' and I do not believe he expects to survive."

There was a sudden change of expression as Spock became aware of his clothing. Quickly, he returned to his bed and sat down, face impassive. "Nurse Chapel, may I have my uniform. I see it has been -- ah, replaced. And my boots."

Mouth twitching, the nurse left the room, pausing only long enough to rouse M'Benga from his sleep.

Kirk watched the African stir, then whispered to Spock. "Meet me on the bridge, Spock, as soon as you're released. Maybe there's still time if we cut a few corners." He looked over at McCoy. "Does he understand what we might have to do... God! Does he?"

"He not only understands, but he expects you to save the Enterprise and the crew. He spoke of committing suicide... but knew that MORS would only have taken somebody else as an interim host." Spock was grave, all the color from the Stimulin leached from his face. "We must speak with Engineer Scott, sir, about... "

Kirk held up his hand, "Later, here comes M'Benga. You get checked out of here as soon as possible, and then we'll talk." The Captain headed for the door, pausing to speak with M'Benga before leaving the room. As he left, Chapel reappeared with Spock's clothes over her arm, his boots dangling from her hand.

M'Benga, now fully awake, examined his patient thoroughly, asking few questions, for which Spock was grateful. The Vulcan, gaze returning again and again to the unconscious McCoy, answered as honestly as he could, knowing that little of what he recalled was of importance to the physician's recovery. Bitterly, he recalled McCoy's plea to be taken to Sanctus; a request that might not be possible now.

"Well, I think that's all for now, Spock." said M'Benga. "You seem fully recovered from the mind meld. Considering what you've told me, I think getting the Enterprise on its way to Star Base Nine is our prime concern." He shook his head, glance resting on his colleague. "There is no way I can predict if Len will ever wake from this sleep. Just look at the intensity of that aura!"

Spock, rapidly donning his uniform, merely nodded. "There is much to be done, and very little time in which to accomplish it. With your permission, sir." He slid his feet into the boots, then stood beside McCoy's unit, his hand briefly grazing the hot forehead. "We will find a way," he said softly. "And you will find peace, my friend." He met the clearly puzzled look of the other physician, and said merely, "Thank you for your care. If McCoy awakens will you notify the Captain, please? We will be on the bridge."

He left sickbay with relief, finding, as always, its machinery and illnesses upsetting to his Vulcan sense of healing. Yet, thinking back on his encounter with MORS, were his ideas more productive than those of the humans? As a 'physician', it was obvious that he had much to heal in himself.

"Warp Eight! Are ye daft, mon? Excuse me, sir... but ye canna expect the Enterprise to sustain that strain on her engines for more than three standard days... " The grizzled head shook stubbornly. "What guid will it do if we're stranded oot in the boonies with no power to speak of?"

The engineer, Kirk, and Spock were sitting in Kirk's quarters, drinking endless cups of coffee. Maps, made with Spock's calibrations for Partha and beyond, lay in disarray on his desk, while the same map was displayed on the terminal. The air was tense, all three officers admitting to the fact. While Scotty's words were indignant, nevertheless he was still scribbling on his log, pressing so hard with the stylus that it was in danger of snapping. Spock, ensconced in front of the computer, was silent for the most part, but he, too, was busy with his calculations. When he finally addressed both men, he was unable to keep back a certain air of satisfaction.

"Gentlemen, I believe I have come up with a viable alternative to destroying the ship's engines." He cast a sideways glance at the engineer. "If we take as fact that the Enterprise can attain a warp speed of ten for short sustained bursts, and that she can readily utilize a speed of warp six for several days, then there is a distinct likelihood by alternating the two speeds, we can make up for the lost time."

Kirk sat up, eyes snapping as he looked at Scotty. "Can you do that? Do we have the capability to reach that speed for say, twelve standard hours... then drop back to warp six?"

The engineer let out a large breath, scratched his head, then stared solemnly at the other two men. "Well, there's an outside possibility, sir... but, I dinna want to get your hopes up too much..."

The Captain got to his feet, going over to stare at the tiny screen. "Doesn't look very far to me, Scotty." His smile was wistful, "Do the best you can -- that'll get us there."

The reply obviously pleased the older man, "Aye, we'll get ye there... ye can depend on that." However, in the next instant the genial features hardened. "I'm not forgettin' for a moment aboot that devil's ability to kill us all." He turned angry eyes to Spock. "Did ye find out of MORS is likely to tap into the dilithium for energy? Or does it ken that to do so would ruin its chances o' gettin' to Sanctus?" He spoke the word as if it were an epithet, leaving a bad taste in his mouth.

Spock's response was thoughtful. "The anger I felt from MORS seemed to be directed at me, personally. However, since we have seen how easily it kills there is no guarantee that -- if thwarted -- it will not take control of the Enterprise." He met the Captain's look, then said, "The creature has the ability to control minds -- and I have no doubt that it can destroy them just as capably." He leaned forward, eyes intent on the screen before him. "Gentlemen, there is no need to assume that MORS will tap into the power of the dilithium. Its power is unlimited already." He turned back, glancing gravely at Kirk. "It drains the Doctor's life primarily in order to 'become' a vital part of him. If I am not mistaken, MORS keeps leashed the greater part of itself simply because if it did not McCoy would be incinerated before they reach their destination."

He ran his fingers over the desk's surface, lightly delineating the articles there. "Its capabilities are far beyond our own, Jim, my shields were useless in the face of MORS' attack. I experienced a total inversion of my mind -- or so it seemed. The sensation was not a pleasant one."

There was a world of compassion in Kirk's reply. "I'm sorry for your pain, Spock. I had no other choice..." Troubled, he mused, "What happens when we do reach Sanctus? Do you think MORS will destroy us? Did you get that impression at all?"

There was a spot of coffee on one of the maps and Spock rubbed at it absently before he responded. Sensing Scotty's tension, he looked over at the engineer. "No, it was angry with me for putting McCoy through the mind meld. Apparently the killing of the Parthan was because he violated their LAW; an unforgivable offense in their eyes. This creature extracts a terrible punishment on those who disobey its concepts of honor."

"Honor!" burst out Scotty. "Why, mon, that thing has no honor! It is a black beastie in league wi' the de'il, I tell ye." He got to his feet, moving restlessly around the room. "We have no way of knowing if it can hear us, or see us right now. Plus, despite

what Mister Spock says, we have no guarantee that it will let us be on our way after we deposit Len and that thing on Sanctus."

Kirk watched both men quietly, sensing the level of tension between them. He had seen Spock's fingers as they nervously played with things on his desk. He also had seen the color rise to a dangerous hue in the engineer's cheeks. Both of them strung as taut as piano wire, and both of them his most reliable men. Just what MORS -- on a rampage -- might do to the rest of his crew he did not even want to think about. More than anything he wanted to walk beside an ocean -- any ocean -- and listen to the whisper of the surf as it eddied around his feet. He could almost feel the tingle of the damp sand, the effervescing foam... so much peace...

Startled, Kirk nearly leaped to his feet. What in the hell had made him recall that place... that time? It was as if the thought had been plucked at random from his mind.

"Jim! What is wrong?" Spock as beside him, eyes wide with concern, warm fingers on his arm.

Before replying, Kirk made an effort to slow his suddenly racing pulse. Taking a long, deep breath, he smiled at the Vulcan. "I was just walking along a beach, wishing I could be there... feeling it. In other words, gentlemen, I believe my mind was just 'visited' by MORS."

"That does it! Captain, you must let us try to destroy it. We canna risk your life as well as pur Len's! You've but to say the word and I'll finish working on the transporter beam separator." The flushed, and very concerned face came near to Kirk's. "We canna risk you, too."

"No. I had the distinct impression that there was no threat implied." He gazed at the star field, a note of understanding in his tone. "I believe MORS was trying to tell me just how it feels... of how much it longs to be... " He looked bemusedly from one man to the other, "... home."

It was the Vulcan who replied. "Captain, the alien may have instilled that false sense of security in order to protect itself. I still feel that the creature is extremely dangerous."

"Hmm? Yes, yes, I agree with you, Spock. But the overwhelming nostalgia... " Kirk shook his head as if to clear it. "You're right. Can't risk the ship or crew because of some damn foolish memory."

He drew himself up, features grim once more. "M'Benga feels that so long as Bones is unconscious MORS will stay there... keeping up his strength, or whatever the hell it's doing. Therefore, Scotty, we'd better make hay while the sun shines... as the saying goes. Take as many of the crew as you need, and set up your plans for the added fuel consumption. We have to push the Enterprise to the maximum... or lose all to time."

He sipped at the bitter, decidedly cold coffee, making a face as he did. "Why can't all this damn technology learn to make a decent cup of coffee?" he complained mildly. "Spock, meet with the Damage Control crew and prepare Chief Hodges for any trouble, whether with a broken-down engine", he grinned at Scotty, "or MORS on a rampage." Then, sobering, he added, "I'm going to have a talk with the bridge crew about McCoy... they deserve to know what's going on -- and be prepared for whatever occurs."

He paused long enough to stare hard at Scotty. "Above all else, not one hostile act -- not one -- until I give the word, or MORS has actually attacked a crewmember. Understood?"

Their gazes locked; then the engineer nodded, "Aye, understood, sir. But I dinna have to like it.... " He fell silent when Kirk glared at him, "I'll be getting on wi' my responsibilities, Captain, wi' your permission. The lads will take a bit of talking to, but they'll not fail ye. Good night, Spock."

Kirk waited until the cabin door had slid open before speaking again. He called softly to the departing Scotty. "When have you failed me? Just be careful that you don't challenge MORS to a duel. It might lose." He smiled fondly, watching as the engineer grinned back, then left, head high.

"I envy you your ability to say the right thing at the right time, Jim. It serves you well. But then, that is one of the reasons you are the Captain, is it not? There was a faint touch of amusement in the dark eyes.

Kirk shrugged. "You weren't raised in a family where the gift for diplomacy made for survival. My brother could get a Klingon to break bread with a slime devil if given half a chance." He grew pensive for a moment, gripping the coffee cup tightly. "Imagine what it must be like for Bones, losing all the memories that cause him pain, yet make up the tapestry of his life. He's being forced to dwell where all those memories are dredged up, fed upon, and then the ones that shaped him -- influenced the course of his life -- are discarded!" He pushed the cup away, nearly spilling its dregs on the maps. "Damn it, Spock! There has to be more for Bones than simply living in his past! Maybe when we can speak with the Antroniuns.... "

"If they will speak with us. There is no guarantee that even the password will be more than the first step in our contact."

The hazel eyes searched the Vulcan's face, then Kirk said, "You're right. But, in the meantime we've work to do. I'll meet you later on the bridge. Time's running out, Spock."

The intercom bleeped and Kirk went to answer it. "Kirk here."

"Are you alone, Captain?" M'Benga's sonorous voice filtered into the room.

"Mister Spock is here."

"How is he feeling?"

The Vulcan stepped forward. "I am quite recovered, Doctor. Apparently there were no aftereffects, or at least none that I have noticed."

"That's good. I thought perhaps you would be pleased to learn that Len has awakened, and although terribly weak, he is out of danger."

Kirk beamed, "Good! I'll be right up to see him. Thanks, Doctor."

"Wait! Ah, I don't think it wise that you visit him right now. The aura around him is still intense -- a sign that MORS is here."

The smile faded. "Does he remember anything at all? Is he trying to talk, or has he asked for anyone?"

"Apparently all memory of the mind meld has been blocked, Captain. He woke up with a headache -- and spoke very urgently about going home."

The Captain nodded, eyes misting. He cleared his throat before any speech was possible. "We'll get him there, dammit. We'll see he gets there. You be sure to tell him that, will you? I'll be on the bridge if you need to reach me."

The physician said good-bye, leaving Kirk and Spock to merely nod at one another before parting. Looking around at the clutter of datadiscs and coffee cups, Kirk sighed, then began clearing away the debris. While he worked he could have sworn there was the odor of the sea in the room.

M'Benga had been correct; to all intents and purposes the Chief Medical Officer had no recollection of his encounter with either Spock or MORS. Within two days McCoy was up and happily telling Chapel that he had never felt better in his life. While the intensely-blue aura had waned slightly, it was markedly apparent in his eyes.

And, if the physician noticed any increase in the activity on board the Enterprise, he said nothing. Instead, after eating a few bites of food and sipping a glass of water, he made for the bridge. As he stepped out of the lift, he met the various glances with a wide smile and a cheery wave of his hand.

"Glad to see you're earning your salary," he teased, looking directly at Kirk, who smiled back. Then he grinned over at Spock. "What do you do with all your credits, Spock? Bet you've got a bank account to beat all. That's the trouble with not havin' any vices -- you die rich, but you've got no memories about having a good time." He sounded so much like the old McCoy, that even Spock looked hopefully at him. Moving quietly, McCoy waited until the Vulcan joined him on Kirk's opposite side. He was so painfully thin that his cheerfulness took on a sense of the macabre -- a not-real aspect that made Uhura bite her lip in distress.

"You seem to have recovered very nicely, Doctor," began Spock, hoping that the Captain would at least quit gazing so fixedly ahead.

Their eyes met, then McCoy said, "It's all a matter of will power, isn't it?" Looking up, he narrowed his gaze as a cloud of pale gases and infant stars loomed into sight. "I see that you're right on target, Mister Sulu. Jim, give him a raise."

The comment brought Kirk around. "You know where we are? I didn't think any of us had been this far out in space." He smiled faintly, "Don't tell me, you were once stationed on a Rim world and forgot to mention it."

McCoy looked fondly at his friend. "Never been here before. But I think that Shaledek mentioned a nebula... called it Vislak, or some fool name." He became thoughtful, his whole frame held in control. "Sanctus isn't very far away -- as the crow flies."

"The crow, as I recall, Doctor, had never been famed for flying any great distance, nor is the bird given to flights of great height. I fail to see the connection." Spock's lips twitched as he waited.

There was an air of pleased exasperation as the Doctor shook his head. "You've got a lot to learn, Spock. I never said they flew high or far. Damn birds just made a beeline for the shortest way to their destination. Too smart to flap around looking for thermal currents. They live a long time and are real smart. Sort of like Vulcans." He grinned at his jibe.

That grin was reflected on the faces of the bridge crew. It was impossible to ignore the exchanges between the two men. Just listening to the human and the Vulcan, they could almost believe that nothing was wrong. Until they glanced at the emaciated figure with the blazing eyes. Their smiles disappeared.

But Kirk was watching the star field, his own expression one of calculated interest. He dared not say anything to give away his feelings. Each minute of this journey took them closer to Sanctus — and whatever awaited Bones there. If only he knew for certain that this act was the right one. If only there was a way to tell this man that they would do whatever was best for him. The well of loneliness that was inside him began to fill with bitter thoughts. Who was standing there, chatting with Spock, assuming the right to stand where Bones always stood. Was it his friend? Or was this grinning, wasted apparition a deadly enemy? He wondered sadly if Sanctus was truly a place of peace — or a living death.

"You're awfully quiet, What's troubling you?" A feverish hand was laid on his shoulder.

Kirk forced a smile. "Truth is, we're lost, Bones. My scout forgot to blaze a trail. We're riding blind."

"We'll find it, Jim. Believe me." The hand patted his arm, then withdrew.

"Captain, entering the Sanctan Neutral Zone," droned Sulu, pointing to the screen. "Wha... ?"

Kirk leaped to his feet, and all eyes were riveted to the viewscreen. As the ship streaked through the blackness of space, there was a gradual blotting out of the stars. After watching this for several minutes, Spock returned to his station, long fingers busily checking coordinates.

One by one the astral bodies disappeared, leaving only velvety-black void. Then, without warning, all engines shut down, plunging the ship itself into total darkness. But on the bridge it wasn't as apparent; for, radiating from the ship's surgeon, the blue aura brightened, burnishing every surface it touched with its cold sheen.

There was a sudden sensation of warmth, quickly withdrawn, leaving the crew to wonder at what they had just felt. After another few minutes, the welcome sound of the Enterprise's engines were heard. When the light flooded back, Kirk's first thought was of McCoy. He half expected him to be gone, but saw him standing close behind Sulu, a rapt expression on his face.

"We appear to have lost our way, Bones," said Kirk mildly. "I hope Sanctus doesn't have an asteroid belt."

Spock straightened up, checking the empty void. "They may not have as asteroid belt, but they do have several moons and a fascinating mass of solar gases just off the starboard helm." He sought Kirk's attention. "I also believe the Sanctans may possess the most sophisticated cloaking device in the galaxy."

Kirk stared. "You're saying that it covers the whole area? Spock, that's impossible."

The Vulcan shrugged. "Highly improbable, Captain, but not impossible. We must not forget that we know nothing of this civilization save its inhabitants can change shape and perhaps live forever. That gives them a certain advantage when it comes to developing devices for protection."

"Including the scan they just used?" Kirk retorted. "What kind of beings are they? A lot of probes are traumatic to humans; this one was nothing more than a warm current being passed through me."

"The LAW forbids harming anyone who comes to Sanctus," replied McCoy offhandedly. "They have no weapons." He still stared at the viewscreen.

Risking MORS' wrath, Kirk said firmly. "They may be unarmed, but with such powers as MORS possesses, arms would be superfluous. My ensign was struck dead by something."

McCoy looked troubled, his own conscience obviously fighting the barriers erected by the alien to that memory. But after a moment his expression cleared, and he smiled at his friend. "Jim, there's no danger. They mean us no harm. You've done it, actually brought me home." His words echoed around the bridge.

For a long moment the Captain gazed at the physician, then said, "Uhura, see if you can make contact with the Sanctans. Perhaps they are expecting us." He felt a tingle of anticipation spread through him, maybe their trump card could be played after all.

"Spock, you will join me?"

Who spoke? Curious, Kirk turned to see if someone had come onto the bridge without their knowledge. There was no one there. When he heard a gasp he whirled back around, to see the Vulcan calmly moving toward McCoy.

"What's happening?" came the murmured question from Uhura.

What indeed. The emaciated frame was almost incandescent, the form beginning to lose definition as it surged with unleashed power. McCoy's features wavered, then reshaped themselves. Kirk knew with a terrible certainty that what small bit of his friend had been alive was fast becoming consumed in this pulsing energy field. "Don't touch it!" he commanded as Spock drew closer still.

A limb of lambent blue touched the Vulcan on the shoulder, but he never wavered. Instead, speaking in a loud, clear voice he said, "CH'RLK T'NAU S TRN'LKTN CH'RLK T'NAU S TRN'LKTN." The extension withdrew, becoming again a part of the Doctor.

"No message as yet, sir." Uhura, over her initial shock, was once again the finely trained officer. "Do you wish me to try again?"

"Keep on; Mister Spock just used the password. Perhaps now we'll have some action." He hated this sort of encounter. There was nothing to do but wait. And, having no stars to navigate by, there was no other choice. Where was the damned planet! Suddenly he punched one of the buttons on his command panel. "Scotty! Where the devil are you?"

Almost immediately the hearty voice replied. "Here, Captain. Trying to figure out why we're operating on impulse power only. There's not a thing wrong wi' anything, yet we've the speed of a shuttlecraft, nothing more!"

"If you were up here, you'd know the answer. Apparently the Sanctans have caught us in their cloaking device, and don't want us bashing into their planet." He lowered his voice, certain that everyone's attention was still on McCoy. "Did you finish in the transporter room? I don't think we've much more time."

"Aye. All preparations have been made. How is he, sir?"

"MORS is using up what little energy was left, I'm afraid. Just be ready if I call you again."

"Aye, aye, sir. Scotty out."

He looked up, and felt rather than heard the swell of sound around him. As by magic, the cloaking device had been lifted, and once again they could see the reassuring sight of stars. Then, glowing like a tiny beacon, they saw an emerald-green planet. They were heading straight for it. He sat forward, "No word yet? What are they waiting for?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Keep the hailing frequencies open, Lieutenant. Apparently they're letting us proceed." Even as he said the words, he felt the smooth power of the great engines gain speed. Getting to his feet, he closed the distance between him and McCoy. The time had come to speak frankly. "Bones? It won't be much longer. Are you sure you want to beam down? This isn't Earth. This is not your true home." He fought back the tears, knowing each member of the bridge crew was doing the same thing.

"Not home?" Blue eyes, brighter than anything in the heavens, stared at him. "Jim, do you think I'm coming here to die? I'll be starting a whole new life. This will be my home for so long as I wish." McCoy shot Kirk a look of sheer delight.

Even Spock stared. And, as they watched, the aura began fading until it was merely a shimmer of light. Kirk saw the familiar features reform, the heart-catching smile envelop him. "Bones, I... damn it, man, this is so difficult."

"No. You mustn't worry. I understand now what my purpose is here. I must go. It will be explained very soon, Jim. You and Spock will see why I was chosen." He chuckled, "Curious, Spock? You're going to be more than that." Then, a wistful note crept into McCoy's voice, "MORS... there's so much I want to remember. You'll have to do it for me. Spock, don't forget the box."

"We'll beam you down when the time comes, Bones. But don't be too eager to leave us."

"Not eager, Jim, just understanding. It makes a difference."

"Captain!" shouted Sulu, "on the screen!"

Conversation was once again forgotten as they watched the viewscreen. Growing larger by the minute, Sanctus was now completely enmeshed its airspace in orange and yellow grids, with an occasional strand of blue. Then, with no warning, the planet itself blinked out — leaving only the whirling lights.

"Is this for our benefit?" murmured the Captain to his first officer. And are we expected to fly through that sensor web?"

"Captain! There's someone trying to reach us. Says his name is," Uhura's eyes grew wide, "Brother Antronius."

"Put him on visual, Lieutenant." Kirk snapped, returning to his command post. "I've a lot of questions to be answered."

The wavering lines finally cleared, and they saw what appeared to be a very tall, humanoid shape, completely garbed in a brown, hooded robe. Beads of several colors hung from his waist. "You seek me?" came the query, "I am Antronius. You have brought one of our people home." His voice was deep and bell-like.

"We are bringing one of your people home, that is true," said Kirk evenly. "The problem is that 'it' has taken over one of my people, and will not give him back. My kind does not force themselves on others — our rules..."

"The LAW gives MORS that right," came back the response. "It is only fulfilling what must be done." The hood kept the man's features from sight, the hands were folded inside voluminous sleeves.

Kirk held fast to his rising temper. "What makes you people so positive their way is the right way? And what will MORS do with McCoy when they beam down? I am losing the finest doctor in the fleet!" He dared not bring their friendship up, dared not look at McCoy.

There was a shifting, a softening of the brother's stance. "And we are gaining a fine physician, are we not? We have so few of his calibre... his kind are desperately needed here. The LAW will see to it that your friend is cared for and loved."

"Sir, just what is it you wish from the Doctor?" asked Spock gently. "Can we contact him from time to time to note his progress?"

"There can be no contact after he leaves your great ship. All that you know will be as nothing. But he comes to us as a healer of great repute, and we will honor him all his days."

"Jim, let me talk to Antronius!" There as a great urgency about McCoy, the light around him glowing as he stood in front of the screen.

"I am McCoy. You say there is much for me to do down there. But I must warn you ahead of time that I can harm no living thing... I have sworn an oath to it."

On sighting McCoy the image on the screen seemed to darken, and the alien bowed low. "We ask only that you share your knowledge for life with us. One of our brothers has taken a creature for its own, and is ill. Never before has that happened. We fear that our kind will be wiped out... you were chosen as our last hope. MORS was to find you and has done so. The LAW has been obeyed."

"Wait! Your MORS also killed in cold blood! He struck down a young Parthan who was here to learn about our ways! That is murder in my world!" Kirk was stern, watching for any sign of response from MORS, but apparently it wasn't going to speak.

"The Parthan is not dead," Antronius replied. "What was his life-force was taken into MORS and will be sent back to Partha. The shell was only so you would accept him." The voice grew stronger, more forceful, and the hood shifted back -- to reveal an empty space! "We are not as you, and your kind have poorly-defined senses, so we assume the forms that seem to please you."

McCoy held up his hand, glowing, shimmering with energy. "Will I need to keep this shape? I find it distressing now, a reminder of what I was. I am causing pain to my friends for they see the outside changes, and have no idea of the inner ones."

Kirk stared. Was Bones trying to protect Spock? Was there a taboo about learning of the inner workings of that mind? He said nothing.

"Do not fear, McCoy. You will know such freedom as never before. Your human shell is already disappearing, soon you will be free of it."

"There's one more thing, before I am ready to beam down." The glance encompassed all on the bridge, resting finally on Kirk. "No harm must befall those who brought me here. No tricks, no accidents to the Enterprise. They have come in good faith, and must leave the same way. I must have your word on that." The gaunt figure stood tall, head high, "I will choose death rather than be responsible for one single fatality."

Once again the scowled figure bowed, "There never was any intent to harm them. We abhor the taking of innocent lives." Antronius pointed toward an open space; in the distance was a small, white building. "It is there you must come, nowhere else. Can you beam down inside that building?"

There was a tiny chuckle from the Doctor. "Scotty can beam me down to land on a pinhead. Give me a few minutes, then I'll be there."

The figure made no response, merely disappeared, and once again the star field was back, Sanctus now much larger, with all the sensor grids gone.

"Bring it up to full magnification, Sulu," ordered Kirk, denying the ache inside. "We'd like to see just where our physician is going to live."

As the planet seemed to grow, the most noticeable sight was the greenery. Small bodies of water glowed greenish-blue, nestled in lush valleys of limitless meadows. Here and there were clusters of low white buildings, never more than fifty... there seemed to be no large cities. Animals wandered across the plains, birds of every description filled the skies. There was a totally unreal feeling about it all. Yet there was no sense that this was an illusion.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" asked McCoy. "MORS had said it was the loveliest spot in the whole galaxy. Makes a country boy like me feel right at home. He began walking toward the lift. "Time to get going. I'll be leaving soon. Care to come with me?"

Was there a catch in his voice? Kirk couldn't answer, merely nodded as he joined Spock and the three of them waited for the doors to slide open. "Take the con, Mister Sulu," he said quietly.

The physician turned to the people who had been his friends, "I wish you happiness in all you do. And good health to enjoy it. Good-bye." There was no sadness, merely withdrawal. No one spoke. No one could.

When they were standing together in the lift, the Vulcan glanced curiously at the Doctor. "This may seem like an unusual request, but do you remember what happened a few days ago?"

Reaching out, McCoy placed his fingers on Spock's arm. "More than you imagine, my friend. I begged MORS to let me keep my memories of you and Jim. It has agreed." He touched Kirk the same way, not letting go of the Vulcan. They stood, linked by an invisible threat of energy, and suddenly the pain of separation was gone. "Can you see that MORS means no harm? I'm needed down there, Jim. I can really work some good."

The words came easily now, and Kirk knew there was no turning back. He had felt such peace about Bones, sensed also the longing for a chance to help others. The loss would have to remain a deeply personal one. He smiled, locking gazes with Spock. "We'll meet you in the transporter room. Scotty's waiting there."

"Everything's packed. I'll be right along. Have to make certain I haven't left anything behind." He waved to them, and headed for his quarters, footsteps making no noise as he hurried along.

Minutes later, along with Scotty, the four of them stood together.

In the Doctor's hand was a large bottle of brandy. He held it out to the engineer. "Here. I was saving this for a special occasion. I want the three of you to have a very long drink when I'm gone. And then, have one for me." The blue eyes were almost normal as tears formed. "Lord, how I hate farewells. Spock, live long and prosper, my friend. I'll try to find the Vulcans who're down there... and tell them about you. They'd be proud to know Vulcan is still turning out such good men." Then, facing the Captain, the older man managed a smile. "We've shared so damn much, haven't we? When you're an admiral, sitting behind some fancy desk, think of me once in a while. Maybe things'll change and Sanctus will allow visitors... I'll let you know... and damn it, that means I'll expect to see you! Take care of yourself, James T. Kirk. And God bless you."

He heard a choked sound and turned to address Scotty. "Ah, don't feel too bad. I have a feeling there's not a bar or bordello down there. You just keep holding this ship together, Scotty, and all will be well. I'll remember you when the nights seem long. Now, it's time to go."

Stepping onto one of the circles, McCoy looked long and hard at the three men. "Don't forget me," he said quietly, nodding at the engineer. "And don't beam me down inside one of the walls!"

Scotty's hand slid the control up, then froze. McCoy's image was caught in the beam's grip, the energy particles that were MORS each clearly visible. "Shall I try, Captain?"

"No." said Kirk sadly, "He wants to go... and they need him. Good-bye, old friend." He turned, heading blindly for the corridor, not caring where he went. Tonight he would toast the man, right now all he wanted to do was find a place to give way to his sorrow.

"Captain?" Spock's tone held a note of concern. "You are wanted on the bridge. There is a message from Sanctus." The Vulcan carefully averted his glance, ignoring the tear-stained visage.

"Thanks, Spock. Let's go." For a moment Kirk wondered if something had gone wrong. Surely, after all this, everything was all right. As they returned to the bridge, the first thing they saw, was the figure of Antronius.

"Enterprise calling Sanctus. The Captain will speak with you now." Uhura smiled at Kirk. "He's been asking for you. Says he has a message from the Doctor."

"Kirk here. Is anything wrong?" His heart was racing, and he searched the area behind the alien, not seeing what he wanted to see. "You have a message for me?"

"The one you call McCoy is here. He has left behind all that he brought. It will be returned to you." The images shifted, grew vague, but Antronius' voice sounded the same. "Because we understand what you humans shared, it is permitted that you should have your fears laid to rest. See what has become of him you knew."

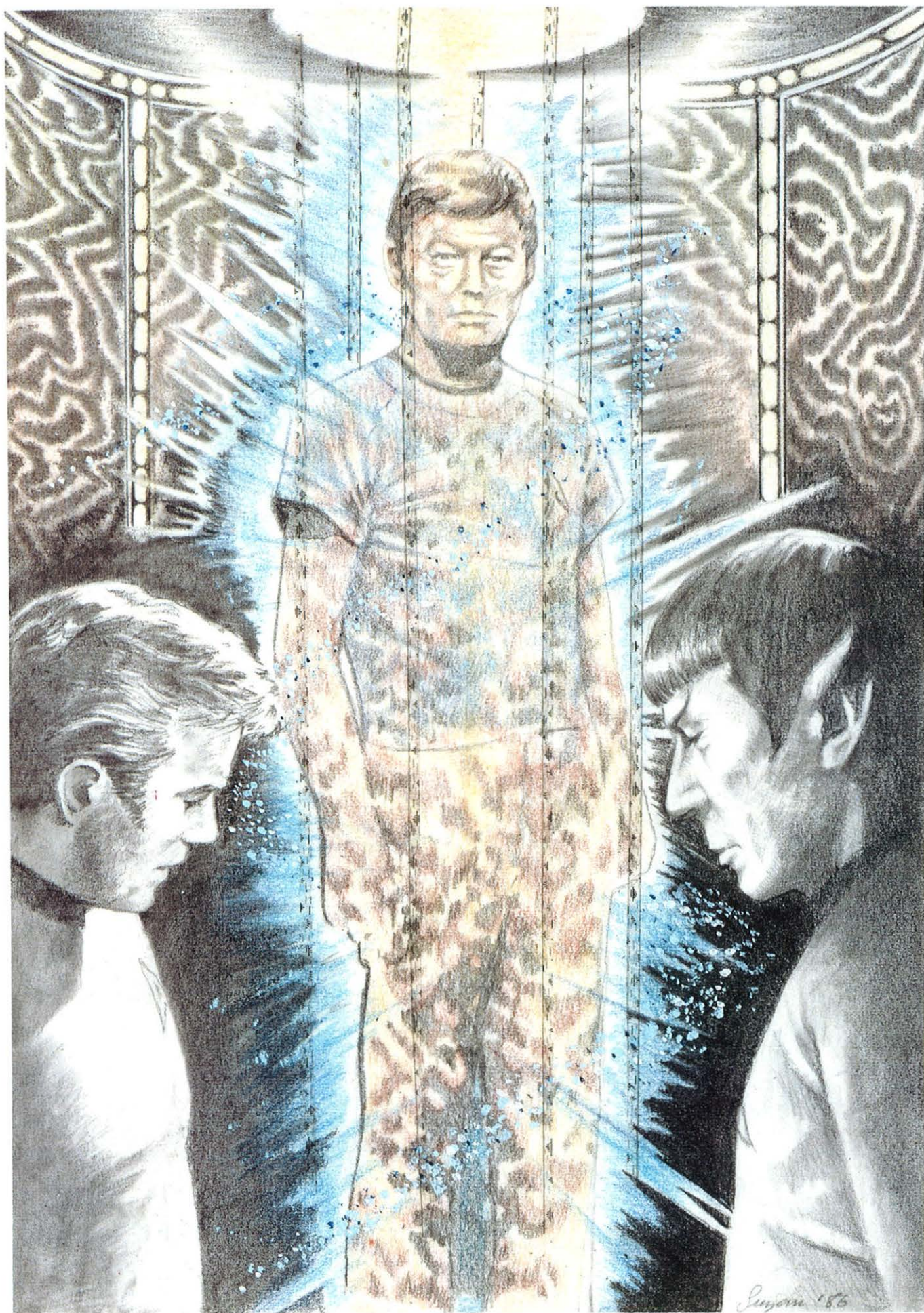
There was a rush of wind, the sweet air rising to circulate through the bridge. A gentle breeze, warmed by an invisible sun, ruffled Kirk's hair, and he was filled with such a peace that he wanted to laugh. Greenery of every description, came to sight, and they were walking down a small footpath of fine, red dirt. Ahead of them was one of the clusters of white bungalows, each door open to the sun. There was the hum of conversation, an air of excitement as they were allowed entrance to the nearest house. It all looked so ordinary, so much like 'home', that Kirk wondered why he felt a little disappointed. "Bones?" he said softly, are you here? It's Jim."

He was enveloped in a blanket of shadowy essence, its shape not recognizable, but human nonetheless. "Jim! They did it! I knew you'd be worried, so I asked them for one last favor. Oh, you can't know the freedom! I feel about twenty years old!"

Kirk was unable to do more than grin, for McCoy's happiness was almost palpable. "Where's MORS?" he asked, not seeing any part of the fearsome alien. Surely Scotty hadn't scattered these particles into space — as they had planned originally."

The shadowy form touched itself at head and heart. "Here, part of me. There's nothing to harm me now, Jim."

The warmth was leaving him, withdrawing to move about the room. Kirk swallowed, there was nothing here to say that this shade had once been his friend, yet did he need more than the feeling inside? "Are you happy? Will you find enough to keep you busy?"



The warmth engulfed him again, and this time he opened himself to accept it. The boyish sense of wonder that surrounded McCoy was one that gave Kirk a feeling of need. When had he lost his own sharp curiosity? When had he given up the idea that there were new worlds to see? Finally satisfied, he accepted the shadow. No, not shadow, he corrected angrily. For this was a person, there as depth and height and breadth to McCoy. Just nothing for him to touch.

"You have to go now, Jim. It is impossible for you to stay on Sanctus for any length of time. Take good care of yourself."

Kirk nodded, then was enveloped again in the gentle wind. When he opened his eyes, he was back on the bridge... and knew he had never left it. Looking around at the rapt faces of his crew, he could see that they, too, had experienced something.

"He's happy," said Uhura, face shining with a dreamy quality.

"There's a lot for him to do down there. So much to catalogue." Was there envy in Sulu's pensive tone?

The Vulcan had said nothing, but deep in the dark eyes was a light such as Kirk had not seen for a long time. "You saw him, Spock? I thought I was right there with him."

"Yes, Captain, I felt the same. I felt as if he was speaking only to me -- was that your impression?"

Kirk nodded. "Yes. Quite a trick, wasn't it? I have a feeling that the Sanctans could work miracles in the Federation, don't you?"

I'm not certain if they will ever feel the need to join." Spock looked moodily out at the glowing planet. "I wonder if he will remember?"

There was a pause as Kirk sought to recapture the enveloping warmth of that last embrace. "I think he will, Spock. Did you notice what was on the table?"

Spock met the grave eyes, then nodded. "I saw. Perhaps the Sanctans do understand some of our needs. It was the one thing the Doctor asked to take with him."

Kirk felt the rise of emotion as he remembered the tiny shoe that had survived McCoy's journey. Life, in the form of his daughter, indeed, life in any form -- the battle McCoy had fought so nobly -- and was destined to fight again. What more could any man ask than to serve those who needed him? He fought to keep down the sense of loss.

"Let's get the hell out of here," he said. "I think we're all ready to go home."



FREEZE FRAME

I was coming to visit
Your lab,
To gab.
To await you
And try to bait you.
But when I came,
I froze!
Freeze Frame.
You were alone ... visiting your human half.
My God,
I wanted to laugh
With delight,
Even though I hadn't the right
To stare ...
While you smiled
Like a child
Into the air.

Somehow
I couldn't help but wonder
What magic spell you might be under.
I felt my heart
Swell
And my hopes soar,
Wishing you would lose yourself some more
While I watched,
Trying to remain detached.
Wanting to see if it was true ...
That some part of you
Might be
Like me ... ?

By: Beisy Fisher

SECRETS



By: Beverly J. Volker

Art by: Sherry Veltkamp

His quarters still felt new and strange to him. The bed was not quite broken in, the temperature in the sonic shower was not exactly adjusted to his liking. Fortunately his personal belongings had arrived from San Francisco including his favorite, familiar desk chair, but most of his other things were still unpacked, standing around the room in cartons. The rooms did not yet have the stamp of James T. Kirk upon them. And the ship smelled new -- like fresh polish on the wood surfaces and paint and oil and soft, upholstered velour that was still stiff.

Scotty had complained about Seventeen-oh-one-A (Kirk still had difficulty calling her "Enterprise"), bemoaning computers that didn't work, and bugs in the warp drive. The Engineer had a penchant for fussing and worrying over every little clink or bump on a mighty starship. Kirk remembered he had been the same with her predecessor and he believed that Scott wouldn't be happy if there were nothing to "fix" on a vessel. Yet, despite Scotty's protests and forewarnings of gloom, the ship had held together and made it through the Great Barrier at the center of the galaxy -- made it through and back out again. That was something even his "old" Enterprise hadn't done, Kirk thought proudly. Maybe in time, he mused, he would fall in love again -- with this silver lady.

Kirk glanced around his quarters, trying to decide if he had time to begin unpacking some of his possessions. The sooner he had them out, the sooner it would begin to feel like home. He checked his chronometer. He had sent Spöck a message to stop by when the Vulcan finished his shift, and Kirk knew that was a short time away. Reluctantly, he supposed he shouldn't start digging into the cartons. He would just get started when his expected visitor would arrive.

Instead, Kirk crossed to his desk and picked up a file tape he had pulled earlier. The label read "Personal File: Spöck, Captain, Serial Number 203J49655R." There was no need to play it. Kirk knew it by heart and he wondered now why he had bothered to request it, why he felt it necessary to have it on his desk when he talked to Spöck. The tape listed Spöck's academic background, his military achievements and history, his scientific skills, his place and date of birth and now included the dates of his death and return to life. Apparently it was considered all the information any commanding officer would need to know. Like hell, Kirk grated silently. What was not in the file had cost him dearly more than once and the time had come, Kirk decided, when he was getting too old for avoidable surprises.

"Too old?" Kirk leaned back in his comfortable chair and wondered why he'd thought that. He should be feeling young. His health was good, he had a new ship to command, good friends alive and well and by his side. He was starting off on a new adventure. He had climbed a mountain and cheated death yet one more time. Cheated death? He had beaten death. Kirk smiled wickedly to himself, his old *savoir faire* returning, making him wonder why he still felt vulnerable, mortal. There had been losses, too, painful losses. He had refused to give up his pain. He had told Sybok he needed it. Yet, while he owned it, he preferred to keep it hidden away, refusing to look at it. His most recent losses were still too close to the surface, however. They peeked out more often than he wanted.

Encountering a young ensign with curly blonde hair would remind him of David. The Klingon representative had accused him of conspiring with his son to build Genesis as a place to launch an attack upon the Empire. It was untrue, of course. He had never worked with David on anything, had barely known him. Kirk wondered, too late, if he and David would have ever become friends. The chance had been taken away from them.

Enterprise was a loss, too, one this new ship was supposed to replace. Perhaps she would in time, but for now she was barely broken in. Time, the passage of it, seemed to go all too quickly. Hadn't it been just yesterday, he wondered, that he had first taken command of Enterprise. She had been new to him then, too, though not newly built. She had served well under Captain April, more recently Pike, and a certain Vulcan had been aboard for eighteen years, first as a lieutenant, then science officer and newly promoted to First Officer. Kirk remembered the confidence -- and apprehension -- he had felt that day he first beamed aboard her....

... An errant lock of sandy colored hair tumbled defiantly across the forehead of the young captain, giving him a tousled, boyish look as he materialized in the great starship's main transporter room. His molecules re-assembled, he stood at once tall, proud, backstraight, and determined despite the youthful appearance. "James T. Kirk, reporting for duty. Permission to come aboard and take command, Lieutenant." He spoke the required words to the transporter chief with an authority that would not anticipate a denial.

"Permission granted. Welcome aboard, Sir," came the correct response. They were expecting him.

A second figure in the room moved toward him. He was tall with foreboding dark eyes and immaculately groomed black hair, cut in regulation style: pointed sideburns that lay at an opposite angle from the pointed tips of his ears. He was dressed in science blue with a newly added commander stripe on his sleeve. "First Officer Spock, at your service, Captain." The deep rich timbre of his voice gave no clue to his attitude. It was neither welcoming, nor resisting.

Kirk had a sinking feeling as he gazed at the stern features. This was the man he would be expected to work closest with on all matters. This was his second-in-command. He had had very little experience with Vulcans, had known none in anything but a very existential way. He was aware only of their reputation as a race and he wondered, now, not for the first time, how he was going to manage to command with a being without emotion working alongside him. He gave no indication of his doubts as he smiled tersely at the Vulcan. "Thank you, Mister Spock. You and the rest of my senior officers meet me in the briefing room in fifteen minutes. I'm going to my quarters."

Kirk moved through the sliding doors into a curved corridor and heard the door swish shut behind him before he realized he had no idea where his quarters were. Busy crewmen and women passed him, unnoticing, as he made a choice, headed toward his right in search of a turbolift. He felt a presence come up behind him and turned to see the Vulcan close by.

"I am on my way to the turbolift, too, Captain," Spock explained.

Kirk let out a breath of relief that he had chosen the right direction. At the turbolift, they entered and Spock gave the order for Deck Five. At Kirk's questioning look, he once more explained. "I must pick up some reports in my quarters which are just next to yours... for the briefing, Sir."

Kirk nodded, "Ah, yes, of course, Mister Spock." The Vulcan did not seem inclined to speak again and the ride was short. At Deck Five he exited first, then moved slowly down the corridor so that Kirk fell in step beside him.

"After the briefing, I'll want to see the bridge," Kirk commented. He stopped as Spock paused beside a door with a new nameplate. "James T. Kirk, Captain." Kirk grinned. "And then I think a tour of the ship would be in order."

"Agreed, Sir."

Kirk wondered if there wasn't a tiny trace of superiority in the quick reply. He pressed his hand to the identiplat and the door slid open. Kirk turned to his First Officer. "Oh, Mister Spock. I'd be most appreciative if you would conduct the tour personally."

A slanted eyebrow raised slightly, but the Vulcan nodded. "As you wish, Captain."

Kirk stepped inside his quarters and let the door slide closed behind him. The Vulcan was certainly going to be a challenge, he breathed. But challenges were the name of the game for this Starfleet officer. He frowned, realizing how Spock had managed to guide him, without appearing to do so, to his quarters. Deliberate or coincidence, Kirk wondered suddenly. If it were deliberate, Spock's subtlety was certainly impeccable and not at all what Kirk had learned to believe about Vulcans.

The Captain looked about his quarters and hugged himself. He was finally home. This ship was all his. His first command, truly unprecedented at his age. Yet he had wanted it for what seemed forever in his young life. A long time ago when he'd been a lieutenant recovering from the mutated polio virus* he had told his friend, "Bones" McCoy, "someday I'll have a starship of my own."

Kirk let his eyes drift around the room. There was an ample desk and chair, some shelves which would hold his personal effects as soon as they arrived. Beyond a latticed divider was a sleeping alcove with a metallic red thermospread on the bunk. Kirk moved to the desk. He had fifteen minutes to discover where the briefing room was and to get there. First, there was something else he wanted to do. He punched at the desktop computer.

"This is Captain Kirk. Please give me the personnel file on Commander Spock." He leaned forward as the information came up on the screen....

* See The Human Touch, by Nancy Kippax, Galactic Discourse #1.

...Kirk abruptly heard his door buzzer and wondered how long it had been sounding. He sat up straight in his chair, about to give the invitation to enter when the door slid open and a perplexed Vulcan strode through. Spying Kirk at the desk, Spock stopped short.

"I beg your pardon, Admir... Captain. You requested my presence and when you didn't answer your buzzer.... "

"Yes, yes I know, Spock," Kirk waved his hand, "come in. I've been sitting here... daydreaming I guess. I didn't hear the buzzer." Spock looked at him quizzically, putting him on the defensive. "There is nothing wrong with my hearing, Mister Spock. I was just... remembering, is all."

Spock nodded, though not giving the impression that he was convinced. "If you say so."

"Well, I do. Come over and sit down. There is a reason I sent for you." Spock did as he was told. Kirk picked up the tape from his desk. "Do you know what this is?" Spock could not see the label so Kirk did not wait for a reply. "It's your personnel file."

Spock arched an eyebrow in the familiar, quizzical way that could both irritate and warm Kirk. "It has all your educational and military background, all your scientific accomplishments. But there's no mention of a mother or father, a wife, or a brother. Since they've all come at various times as, shall we say, inopportune surprises to me, I'd like to know now if there are any other relatives out there that I should know about before they turn up to nearly get me killed or lose my ship."

It was Spock's turn to become defensive. "Jim, I regret any inconveniences my family have caused."

"Inconveniences?" Kirk snapped, then he took control of his tone. "Spock, how many years have we been friends? How much life and death have we been through together? Why are there still things about you, still major things, like the existence of a brother or the ability to place your katra in another being, that you keep hidden from me?"

"I... do not do so intentionally," Spock protested.

"You could have fooled me," Kirk commented. "They don't seem like things you could have just forgotten to mention for twenty-five years." Spock swallowed. The act was not lost on Kirk. Instinctively he knew this friend would never consciously hurt him. Yet he had, inadvertently or not, too many times over the years.

"What would you have me say, Captain?" Kirk caught the testiness in his voice.

"Spock, we're starting out on a new mission, a new ship. There's a new future for us out there." The passion in Kirk's voice faded. "I just want to know what I can expect from you."

Spock seemed genuinely surprised. "As always, my loyalty, devotion to duty... "

"Your friendship? Your honesty?" Kirk cut him off. He waited for an answer.

Spock lowered his head. "I... do not understand why you would question... "

"Perhaps." Kirk voice held a sadness. "But you still can't say it, can you? After all this time, the words still stick in your throat, don't they?"

"I am what I am."

"And what is that, Spock? A Vulcan? Does that sum it all up? Is that all you are?"

"No, Jim. I am also your friend. Is that what you wanted to hear?" Spock sighed.

"Well, it helps," Kirk agreed. "I... don't need constant verbalization of your feelings and I don't doubt your loyalty or your friendship, but Spock, when you spring these unexpected things on me -- at critical times -- well, I'd just like to avoid that in the future."

"I shall attempt to comply." It was not exactly the answer Kirk was hoping for, but it was apparently all Spock was willing to give at this time. Kirk drew back.

"I shall hold you to that, Captain Spock." He glanced at his chronometer. "That's all. You may go."

Spock appeared to want to respond, but instead rose at Kirk's dismissal. The Captain watched him leave, his steps uncharacteristically slow. As the door slid closed behind Spock, Kirk drew a hand across his mouth, chewing on his bottom lip. Sometimes, he thought, he felt as uncertain as that young starship captain facing his forbidding First Officer for the first time. Kirk's intercom beeped. Ruefully, he jabbed at the button.

"Captain, Scott here. We've a wee bit of a problem, Sir." The heavy brogue was accompanied by a look of consternation as the Engineer appeared on the viewscreen.

"What is it, Scotty. Something you can't handle by yourself?" Kirk was in no mood for riddles or histrionics.

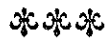
"Well, its nae exactly that, Captain. But it's something I think you ought to see. That horde o' renegades with Sybok have left us a little souvenir of their visit an' well, we've got a decision to make and it oughta be yours."

"You're not going to be more specific, I take it, Engineer," Kirk already knew the answer.

"If it wouldna be too much trouble, Captain. I can explain better if I show you what I'm talkin about," Scott insisted.

"I certainly hope so," Kirk mumbled to himself. To Scott, knowing he would end up agreeing. "Very well, Mister Scott. I'm on my way."

Kirk cut the transmission. He'd almost forgotten how demanding command could be.



In his dimly-lit new quarters, Spock sought refuge. He did not bother to change into a leisure robe as he usually did when he came off duty. Instead, he headed directly for his meditation alcove, staring absently at the glowing Idlumputt. It offered no solace. He moved to the sleeping area and picked up his lyre from its place on the wall. Playing music usually relaxed him, but his fingers felt too cold and stiff to strum. Spock checked his thermostat, turned it up a few degrees. He was still cold. Sitting on his bed, he pulled the Vulcan coverlet around his shoulders and drew it close. He shivered. The cold, he knew, came from within himself. Kirk was angry with him, justifiably, Spock supposed, yet he was at a loss to understand how he had allowed it to happen. It had never occurred to Spock to tell Kirk about Sybok. He had not seen his half-brother since he had been very young, and there had been no reason to suspect their paths would ever cross again. He certainly had not expected to find him leading a band of dissidents who would hijack this very starship. The odds against such a chain of events was infinitesimal, yet Spock reasoned that he must have made a misjudgment, one that almost cost Kirk's life. Spock shuddered at the thought of such an outcome and remembered another time when he had caused a similar situation.

Spock had not felt comfortable enough to discuss Vulcan physiology with his Captain and he had foolishly thought that his hybrid status might spare him from Pon Farr. He had been wrong in his judgment of the mating drive and wrong in keeping his counsel on the subject. Too late, he had revealed the problem to Kirk, too late for alternative actions and he had wound up nearly killing, with his own hands, the man who had shown only friendship. He would have killed him had it not been for McCoy's quick thinking. After all these years, the memory was still nearly unbearable to Spock.

In the years since, Spock had learned to be more open with his feelings, especially toward Kirk. Surely Kirk did not doubt his devotion. He had tried to express it as many ways as he could. He remembered -- a vague memory now -- telling Kirk that he was and always would be his friend. And more recently, he had professed his friendship for those who had rescued him from Genesis to Sarek when they had returned to Earth with the whales. Sarek did not truly understand the concept, he knew, but at last he respected Spock's decisions. Sarek, too, was grateful to Kirk, had in fact, more than one reason to be.

That memory was also painful for Spock. It was the other time Kirk had referred to earlier, when Spock's misjudgment -- his secrecy -- had nearly killed Kirk. For the omission of not informing his Captain that the arriving Vulcan Ambassador was his father, there was no excuse. That he and Sarek had not spoken for eighteen years, was no reason to hide his relationship. It was not a secret, as the Pon Farr had been. Spock had waited until the last moment to inform Kirk about his parents. Then Kirk, in an act of compassion and concern for him, had prevented his Vulcan friend from committing patricide....

... Spock felt as though he were climbing up from a long, deep tunnel. A light at the top worried at his senses until he could no longer ignore it. Wearily, he dragged his eyelids open. The light source was in the room. He peered out, his vision foggy. It cleared slowly around the edges and he could make out shapes. Sickbay. He frowned, concentrating, trying to clear his thoughts. Something about his father... an operation... A lifeform was moving toward him.

McCoy came into focus as he approached the bed. "That's it, take it slow. It'll all come back to you in a few minutes. Had to give you a pretty strong sedative. Your

Vulcan physiology tosses off most human drugs like they were water. But you needed rest, needed time for your body to replenish itself." The Doctor was checking the readings over the bed. "Your vitals are looking good. How do you feel?"

It all came rushing back to Spock, his father's coronary problem, the attack on the ship... "The Captain?" Spock tried to see across the room. "How is the Captain?"

McCoy placed a hand on his chest to prevent him from rising. "Whoa. I said your vitals were looking good. I didn't say that meant you could hop out of bed." He pulled out his scanner. "Let me just check you over."

"Doctor," Spock snapped impatiently. "The Captain was seriously injured. Will you please just answer my question?"

McCoy gave him a long look. "Your father is resting comfortably. He preferred his own quarters so I had him moved there. I have to say I'm pretty proud of myself. The operation seems to have gone so well, he'll be like a new man in no time. And your blood made it possible."

Spock saw the cloud behind the cheerful words, the pale blue eyes that seemed weary instead of bright with success. He was almost afraid to press. "Jim?"

McCoy seemed to gather himself, pull on a cloak of appropriate bedside manner. "He's in ICU, Spock. At this point, I just don't know. It could go either way. The wound he took was bad, dangerous, but with proper care, not necessarily life-threatening. He changed those odds by going to the bridge and lowered them even more by staying there during the crisis."

"Why did you allow him..." Spock's eyes grew dark, accusing.

"Allow? Since when does anybody allow James Kirk anything? He's the Captain. He does whatever he's bent on doing." The words were angry. Spock sensed the fear behind them.

"I must go to him." Spock pressed against the hand on his chest.

"He's not conscious. He spiked a fever, his blood pressure dropped. The wound reopened but I've got to get him stabilized before I can attempt to go in and close it again. Meanwhile, he's bleeding internally and I'm giving him blood... I may not be able to wait. I may have to risk surgery in his condition to stop the bleeding. I've been trying to make that decision. That's where I was when your monitor showed you were waking up. Chapel's in there with him now, but I have to get back."

Spock found it hard to swallow, his mouth was suddenly devoid of moisture. "Please... McCoy. I... would like to see him."

McCoy nodded, drawing in a resigned breath. "Very well, Spock, c'mon." He moved his hand to Spock's arm to assist. "Just watch yourself getting up. You're going to be very woozy."

Kirk lay under the sterilight, the monitor on the wall behind him fluctuating slightly in all the wrong directions. Readings that were supposed to register high were too low and vice-versa. The bluish glow over Kirk gave him an unreal appearance and the sight of the still figure did nothing to inspire confidence in Spock about his condition.

McCoy moved off to confer with his nurse after checking the life-levels on Kirk and assuring himself that Spock was able to remain standing on his own at the Captain's bedside.

Spock watched the steady rise and fall of the Captain's chest, all too humanly clinging to that single movement as verification that this life still functioned. He ignored his own reminders of weakness and willed his legs to support him, fighting off the vertigo that threatened his upright position. He allowed his gaze to drift upward from the expanding chest to the closed lids, hiding the normally alert hazel eyes that could see so deeply into his thoughts and moods. Long lashes brushed the young captain's cheeks, giving him the peaceful appearance of sleep... or death.

Spock swallowed down the nausea rising up in his throat, wondering absently if it were caused by the recent medication or the empathic sight of his wounded friend. The noun denoting the man on the bed came unbidden to his mind.

Spock felt a slight touch on his arm, an annoying intrusion demanding his attention away from the Captain. He turned, knowing who had interrupted, but a caustic remark died on his lips when he saw that McCoy was urging a chair toward him.

"Here, sit down before you fall down." McCoy instructed. Then, more gently, "I'm going to get things set up for surgery. I believe that we shouldn't wait. We've got to get that tear repaired."

Spock took the chair more gratefully than he would have admitted, but he was worried about McCoy's decision. "You implied that it would be dangerous to operate on the Captain in his present condition."

McCoy let his hand rest on Spock's shoulder, but his eyes were on his patient in the bed. "Jim is strong and his general health is good. It is a risk, that's true, but all surgery is. I believe the odds are on our side — at least by an acceptable margin." Spock quirked an eyebrow, but McCoy shook his head. "Don't ask me to quote them to you, Spock. You wouldn't find my calculations to your liking. A lot is gonna depend on his good old fashioned strength of will to live and this country doctor's educated hunch that we can do it."

McCoy's humanness frightened Spock, especially when James Kirk's life depended on it, but Spock knew he must concede to the physician's expertise in this instance. "You have proven your skill in the surgery on my father, Doctor. I shall trust you to do what is necessary for the Captain."

McCoy smiled and patted the Vulcan's shoulder. "You just sit there with him till we get ready. Perhaps if you talk to him, he'll know you're here."

Spock turned his focus back on Kirk as McCoy left. He wanted to believe McCoy, that Kirk's own strength of will would pull him through, that if he spoke, the Captain would know he was at his side. But the prone figure was so still, so quiet. He seemed all too frail to undergo what lay ahead for him.

"If I could give you my strength, too... if I could lend support, sustain you through the surgery..." Spock found himself whispering aloud, "perhaps the two of us together could be enough to survive."

As Spock watched he saw a slight movement under the closed eyelids. He glanced at the monitor; the readings had moved a little in a positive direction. Spock drew in a breath and leaned closer to the bed. Tentatively he reached trembling fingers toward the paled face, pulling back as he made contact with a soft cheek. Then, more determined, he splayed his hand along the side of Kirk's head.

"Listen to me," he intoned quietly, "I am with you... my strength with yours... my mind with yours... my heart with yours. You must live... I will give to you even as you gave for me... You saved my father's life by jeopardizing yours, now let me help you... Jim, whatever you need, let me supply... "

Spock felt a stirring beneath his hand and he abruptly drew it away from Kirk's face, wondering if he had done the wrong thing by trying to reach the unconscious mind.

Slowly, Kirk's eyes fluttered open, his gaze searching, unfocused. His dry lips parted as though he were trying to speak, but no sound came. He moved the fingers of one hand across the bedcover, reaching for something without direction. Spock covered Kirk's hand with his own.

"Here... I am here," he knew instinctively what Kirk sought.

"Sp.... Sp... "

"Yes, Jim... "

Kirk licked his lips, his eyes seeming to follow the voice until he managed to peer toward Spock's face. "Wat... wat... er," he asked.

Spock used his free hand to reach a small drinking sponge on the shelf by the bed. He pressed it to Kirk's lips.

His mouth wet, Kirk seemed more able to focus his gaze. "Sp...ock... your... fa... fath... "

"Sarek is recovering," Spock assured. "Jim, don't try to talk. You need your strength. McCoy is going to operate." He was not certain Kirk understood.

Kirk's eyes formed a question, "You?"

Spock squeezed the hand beneath his, "I'm here, I am with you."

"You... you okay?" Kirk's voice was barely audible.

Spock felt his stomach tighten. Kirk was struggling to live and all he was concerned about was the Vulcan's well-being. "I am... okay," Spock told him. "Feel my hand on yours... feel my strength. It is yours."

Kirk closed his eyes and Spock threw a panicky look at the monitor. The indicators were leveling. He was unaware that McCoy had reentered the room and stood behind him.

"You did it, Spock. Whatever you said to him, he heard you. His vitals have improved."

Spock didn't move. "He was conscious for a few minutes, Doctor."

"We're going to take him now, Spock. I'd like you to lie back down and I'll let you know as soon as I can." McCoy ran a scanner over the Vulcan. He frowned, but refrained from his usual scolding. Instead, he merely said, "You've overtaxed yourself, Jim's gonna need one hundred percent from you."

Heavily, Spock rose to his feet, and moved toward the door as Chapel and M'Benga arrived to assist in the surgery. He made his way back to his bed in the next room, without being aware of his movements; all his concentration was on the activity going on around Kirk. For what seemed an agonizing length of time, Spock lay on his back, staring at the ceiling without seeing it. His mind repeated the liturgy he had spoken to Kirk, willing his own strength and support to sustain the Human. At last he heard footsteps and turned to see McCoy approaching. Words were not needed, the Doctor's face held the answer he sought. Kirk would be all right.

"He's resting quietly. I want to keep him sedated for a little while. You can see him when he wakes up."

Only then did Spock finally allow himself to relax. His world was back on course....

... The memory of Kirk's brush with death on their mission to Babel was still painful to Spock. Even after so many years and many more crises, the fear for Kirk's safety had not lessened, but rather had intensified as their lives became more entwined. Kirk's recent harrowing experiences of falling from El Capitan and being stranded on ShaKaRee were like knives twisting in Spock, knives that made open wounds which had not had time to heal. Spock had been trying to deal with them when Kirk had summoned him to his quarters. Apparently the Captain had some open wounds of his own, inflicted by Spock himself as surely as the tightening of the Ahn-Woon around a Human throat on the red sands of Vulcan. Reluctantly, Spock admitted that for Kirk, 'loving Spock had been hazardous to his health.' Unable to give all that Kirk needed or expected, Spock knew he had made grave misjudgments in his dealing with the Human. Even in the ultimate sacrifice of giving his life so that Kirk and the rest of the ship might survive the battle with Khan, he had caused Kirk unbearable pain, had ultimately cost him his son and his ship because Kirk had once again acted for him at his own expense.

Spock rose from his bed, the Vulcan cover dropping from his shoulders. He paced around his quarters, his mind chaotic. He knew he wanted to give what Kirk wanted from him. He wasn't sure how to do that. He had told Kirk, 'I am what I am,' and while Kirk seemed to take that as an arrogant answer, Spock knew it was true. He didn't know how to change, was not even certain what he should try to become.

He believed that Kirk had accepted him years ago. Kirk had taken him for what he was and asked no more. The Human had not demanded that Spock fit into a predetermined mold nor tried to humanize him as McCoy so often did. Nor did Kirk demand pure logic from him, as Sarek seemed to expect. Even Amanda did not seem to have an explanation for her hybrid son. She admonished him to show his Human side, yet raised him in Vulcan tradition. Only Kirk asked not what his race might be.

Through the years, Kirk had been open, teasing, trusting, accepting him as a friend, expecting only that Spock be the best he could be. Spock knew now he had failed Kirk over and over. He had disappointed and hurt him, cost him dearly. The Captain had said they were beginning a new adventure, a new future. Spock moved to his desk and sat

down. He would resolve, he decided, to find out how to become what Kirk needed and he would fulfill that need. Whatever it might cost, Spock would pay it for Kirk. He swallowed. The first step, he believed, was to talk with McCoy. It was not an easy step. Spock was always loathe to discuss personal matters with the Doctor. Yet McCoy was Kirk's dear friend and did, in fact, seem to understand Kirk very well. Spock also had to admit that McCoy had proved himself a trusted friend to him, as well. Spock could and would endure the meaningless barbs, the exaggerated Human prattle that the Doctor could effect, if it would help him understand what he must do to be a better friend to Kirk. Resigned, he pressed the intercom for sickbay. McCoy would be finishing up his shift; perhaps Spock could arrange to meet him in his quarters. The prospect was not heartening.

Leonard McCoy had just finished a report which had kept him working past the end of his shift, when the emergency call came into sickbay. At once alert, he listened while one of the younger medics answered it. There had been an accident in engineering — some kind of explosion and someone was injured... McCoy heard the young medic ask all the pertinent questions that would help them know how to respond without wasting time. The young woman was well-trained and efficient, McCoy noted.

There appeared to be only one casualty; he was still trapped under some debris...

"No, don't try to get him out... " the medic was instructing. "Our team is on its way... " She was punching buttons to summon the rescue squad while she was speaking.

McCoy moved in her direction. "Get that bioscan going, Doctor, so we can find out who it is and what his condition is."

Suddenly, a haggard looking Chief Engineer appeared on the viewscreen. "It's Captain Kirk, Doctor McCoy. He was inspectin' some badly damaged machinery at my request and all of a sudden the whole damn thing jest went up. I canna tell how bad he's hurt, but he's not movin'."

McCoy could barely believe what he was hearing. Jim Kirk could get into trouble faster and with less provocation than anyone he knew. "On my way, Scotty. Just don't touch him... "

Starfleet service kept Leonard McCoy still reasonably agile and he moved with the speed of a man half his age toward engineering. Questions tumbled about in his head. Why was Kirk in engineering this time of day? Why had Scott felt it necessary to summon the Captain about damaged machinery? How the hell was he supposed to keep that man well, when he went looking for trouble? In fairness, McCoy knew Kirk's actions would be justified but on this frantic race to see if there was a life to save, McCoy could only remember incredibly how he had planned to stop by Kirk's quarters to see if his friend would join him for dinner.

McCoy entered the engineering floor on a run. Sometimes it seemed like he had spent the majority of his adult life running, and almost half of that after Jim Kirk. There was the familiar sensation of fear, but more than that, there was anger. Anger at a man who refused to accept limitations, who constantly pushed his luck past any boundaries man or god could define.

Kirk was crumpled on the floor by the west wall of the room, a room that right now was in the throes of total chaos that exists after a cataclysmic disruption. Ignoring the confusion and noise around him, McCoy knelt over his patient.

Scott appeared instantly at his elbow. "The Captain took the full force of the explosion behind him. It threw him into this bulkhead here front-first. He hasn't regained consciousness," he supplied, a worried frown on his face.

McCoy began to run the mediscanner. There had been a concussion to the head, therefore Cordrazine was contraindicated. Kirk's breathing was shallow and fast; McCoy focused the scanner on the chest area where a worse story was portrayed. There was an indication of internal bleeding in the chest cavity, bruising of the heart muscle, and one lung was nearly fully collapsed.

Behind him he heard, rather than saw, the Trauma team from sickbay arrive with supplies and a cart. Quickly he poked through the box and came up with the portable oxygen mask. He injected a full vial of Dioxiyase to help Kirk to breathe easier. Another vial helped stabilize the heartbeat.

Speed was of the essence. With a curt nod to the attendants, Kirk was lifted onto the gurney and prepared for the short journey to sickbay. McCoy had done all he could for the moment to sustain Jim's life forces. The real battle would come in sickbay, when McCoy knew he would need every trick in his magic bag to restore the Captain to full recovery. And what was worse, Spock would have to be told.

Orders were unnecessary to the trained team that was waiting to receive their important patient in sickbay, but McCoy barked them out in rapid succession anyway. It was his way of reassuring himself and the others involved that everything was under control, being handled efficiently and accurately. Kirk was attached to machines and monitors that would give vital information on treatment and prognosis. In the next crucial moments, McCoy and his associates would have to forget who the victim was and concentrate on their skills and training. For the young professionals, newly assigned to serve on the ship, their actions were automatic and impersonal. The man on the table was a legend, heard about only in classrooms or lecture halls at the Academy. Most of them had not yet even spoken to Kirk personally. Professional detachment was more difficult for McCoy.

Here lay a man who had been his best friend for more decades than he cared to admit and this same scene had been played out more times than he cared to admit as well. Assisting personnel might have been different, the location might have been varied, but McCoy's desperate race against time and injury, calling on the ultimate of his medical knowledge to save the life of one James Kirk, was all too terrifyingly familiar. The irony was that it never got easier, never became routine, never failed to invoke breath-holding fear that one time he might not succeed.

The immediacy of the situation began to subside a little as Kirk's condition was temporarily stabilized, his breathing assisted and heart rate regulated. Information was being relayed for evaluation.

McCoy became aware of a comfortable presence at his side. He turned to face the familiar liquid eyes of Christine Chapel and felt a blanket of peace. Here was someone who could share his own concern for their Captain, whose Starfleet history aboard the Enterprise had paralleled his own. Doctor Chapel had been at his side as nurse through many of Kirk's crises. The simple fact that she understood was reassuring.



"It's not good, Chris," he frowned. "He's bleeding internally, some ribs are broken, collapsed lung, severe bruising of the heart. The concussion doesn't seem too serious, but he hasn't regained consciousness."

"I see," Chapel scanned the readouts herself. "The heart-lung machine is doing its job for him. Why don't you see if you can get him to come around."

McCoy nodded, leaning close to Kirk. He laid a hand on his shoulder. "Jim. Jim. It's McCoy. Can you hear me?"

Kirk's eyelids fluttered.

"That's it. C'mon, stay with me. Jim. Can you open your eyes?"

As if with great difficulty, Kirk managed to comply; his eyes focused slowly. Pain reflected back at him.

"Okay," McCoy soothed, "That's fine. You're doing fine."

Kirk's eyes cleared a little. He opened his mouth to speak but failed.

McCoy patted his shoulder. "Don't try to talk. Let me do it. You were injured in an accident in engineering. You're in sickbay now and we're taking care of you."

Kirk was not satisfied. "Wha... what's... wrong... ?"

"Some bruising in your chest," McCoy oversimplified. "You're having some trouble breathing so we're helping you. We haven't finished examining you yet, but I wanted to see if you were in there. Are you in pain?"

"Head... " Kirk managed.

"Yeah, well you gave it a good bang... that's why you've got a headache."

"Ship... was... dam... damaged... "

"Probably not as bad as you," McCoy assured. "It's still functioning."

"Sy... Sybok's... people... messed... messed up... some... thing in engineering. Spock should.... huurhh... "

"We'll get Spock on it right away," McCoy interrupted. "Now you just lie there and take it easy till we find out what to do with you."

"But... but... must tell... uugh.... "

"Jim, you've got a staff full of experienced officers. They'll handle any problems. This is an order from your friendly CMO. Your job is to keep still and let me do my job."

"Bones... Bones... please." Kirk tried to get his thought across. "Don't let Spock... blame himse... " It was too much effort to speak and breathe at the same time. Kirk closed his eyes.

McCoy brushed the perspiration from Kirk's forehead. "Shhh... stop worrying.... " He felt a touch at his elbow.

"Wish I could give you the same advice," Chapel smiled sadly. "Leonard, I wanted to tell you about Spock.... "

McCoy turned and took Chapel by the arm to usher her away from the bed. "Over here, Chris. I don't want him to hear anything right now. What about Spock? Did you talk to him? Did you tell him what happened?"

Chapel shook her head, "No. One of the yeomen told me he called you just after you left for engineering. He said he wanted to speak with you when you got off duty. The yeoman didn't know who was involved in the explosion, so she didn't tell him anything and he didn't say why he wanted to talk to you."

McCoy sighed, "Well, I'd better get back to him before he hears about the accident. Get Scotty for me. Tell him I'm notifying Spock. Tell him not to... "

The outer door to the sickbay complex slid open and an agitated Vulcan strode through.

"Too late," McCoy breathed.

"McCoy, the Captain... ? Engineer Scott said.... " Spock glanced around the room. Quickly McCoy moved to intercept.

"Just going to call you, Spock. Let's go to my office."

"How badly is the Captain injured?" Spock urged.

"I'll tell you what I know as briefly as I can, then I've got to get back to him." McCoy turned to Chapel. "Christine, keep an eye on things for me for a few minutes, will you?" He moved Spock toward his own office. "It's not good, Spock but he's pulled through worse things... "

For the next several hours, McCoy barely had a chance to breathe as he worked to repair the damage which had been done to Kirk. Spock had hovered nearby until the pressure of command had finally demanded he deal with shipboard status, in particular the situation in engineering. The Doctor himself had barely noticed his leaving, being too preoccupied with his patient, but when he finally became aware of the absence, he knew Spock had relinquished his vigilance reluctantly. Nevertheless, McCoy was relieved that other matters had called the Vulcan's attention elsewhere.

Finally, having stopped the internal bleeding, repaired the fractured ribs and re-inflated the collapsed lung, McCoy was satisfied that he had done all that was possible at this time. He had drained the fluid from Kirk's chest cavity and was monitoring to see that no more accumulated around his injured heart. Paradigitoxin had been administered to regulate the heartbeat and Kirk was still being helped to breathe, but the patient was resting quietly at last, and in no pain. Much of the rest of the healing would come from Kirk's own body. McCoy would basically be standing by to see that nothing interfered with the process. McCoy considered that a risky position to be in given Kirk's track record for unexpected problems.

The physician once more rechecked all of the equipment attached to his patient before giving himself permission to leave him alone for awhile. Assured that he could return the instant anything at all was the slightest off center, McCoy retired to his office, where he thought he might be able to relax a short while before Kirk needed his attention again.

He punched his server for a much needed cup of coffee and was mildly surprised when he checked his chronometer to find that it was well after midnight. Part of him was bone-weary, but the other part was too keyed-up from the night's tension to rest. He knew he should call Spock, but somehow he suspected it wouldn't be necessary. The Vulcan would be in soon enough wanting to know their friend's condition. The thought had no sooner passed through his consciousness when, as if on cue, a familiar figure entered from the outer corridor.

Wearily, McCoy wished he did not have to deal with Spock, but knew it to be an illogical wish. And perhaps a selfish one, he considered, gauging the appearance of his visitor. The Vulcan looked as though he had had as rough an evening as himself.

"His condition?" Spock had only one concern.

"Guarded, but he's resting right now and he's in no pain," McCoy didn't feel up to a full medical report. He hoped to forestall it. "Want some coffee? You look like you could use some."

Spock lowered himself into the chair opposite McCoy without waiting for an invitation. "Coffee is not conducive to a body already over-tired, Doctor. It produces a false energy."

McCoy's eyes widened. "Are you admitting to being over-tired?"

"I was referring to yourself," Spock denied. "You've put in a long night with the Captain, I see. What do you mean by guarded?"

"I mean he's stabilized now. I've stopped the bleeding and taken care of all the immediate problems, but he's not out of the woods yet." McCoy hedged.

"Please. Spare me your colloquialisms." Spock folded his hands in front of him. "Just tell me your prognosis. Is he going to be all right?"

McCoy scowled. "Medicine isn't an exact science, Spock. You know that. A lot of it depends on luck and the individual spirit. Jim Kirk's a fighter -- always has been. If it's up to him, he'll be all right. And right now it pretty much is up to him -- or rather his body -- to heal itself."

Spock seemed to consider McCoy's words, not certain how reassuring they were. McCoy knew the Vulcan would have preferred a more specific explanation, but there wasn't one to give. He saw no reason to list all the things that could go wrong, to worry Spock over all the details he worried over himself. Spock couldn't help Kirk. He decided to change the subject.

"Did you find out what happened in engineering -- what caused the explosion?"

Spock nodded. "When Sybok's people took over the ship they made some adjustments so it could go through the Great Barrier. Apparently they were not as familiar with the ship's design as they needed to be and they caused some imbalance in the pressure stabilizer. Scott noticed the readings were wrong and when he investigated he found the valves on the baffleplate had all been maladjusted. That's when he called the Captain, because he knew right away that they couldn't have gotten that way by accident. They had been deliberately moved."

"Sabotage?" McCoy asked.

"He wasn't certain. That's why he wanted Captain Kirk to see it. If the renegades had purposely tried to destroy the ship, we might have had an interstellar incident, considering that Romulans and Klingons as well as a number of other races were involved. On the other hand, if it were merely a case of lack of knowledge or inexperience.... "

"You mean they didn't know what they were doing," McCoy simplified.

"Precisely," Spock agreed. "I believe that is what I said. Mister Scott felt the Captain ought to see the situation before he questioned our passengers."

"That would be those who are still on board."

"Yes. But what Scott did not realize was that one of the valves was about to let go. It exploded just after the Captain entered the chamber."

"Damn!" McCoy swore. "That bunch of misfits caused more trouble... "

"I interrogated them. Misfit may be an applicable term, but misguided would be more accurate. Their intent was not to cause damage. They were merely following... my brother," Spock seemed to have difficulty with the concept.

"Spock, I'm sorry about your brother but... "

"I should have fired when the Captain ordered me to." Spock interrupted McCoy's expression of sympathy. "He was not an evil man, but he was dangerous. If I had stopped him when I was told, Captain Kirk would not be fighting for his life right now. I disobeyed a direct order and it has caused the Captain's injury."

"Now, wait a minute, Spock," McCoy began. "You can't be responsible... "

"My irresponsibility to duty began the chain of events which resulted in the explosion that hurt our captain," Spock concluded.

"Sybok was your brother, for God's sake," McCoy argued.

"That is no excuse for disobeying... "

"It's not an excuse. It's a valid reason," McCoy insisted. "Jim wouldn't have given you that order if he had known he was telling you to shoot your brother."

"And that is just the point, Doctor," Spock seized the moment. "He did not know because I hadn't been truthful with him. I should have told him who Sybok was as soon as I saw him on the viewscreen."

McCoy shrugged. "Well, I admit your reticence was a bit inconvenient."

"Not inconvenient, McCoy," Spock corrected. "Life threatening."

McCoy leaned back in his chair, suddenly very tired of trying to convince a Vulcan whose mind was made up. He remembered Kirk's urgent words, 'Don't let Spock blame himself.' That was easier said than done when Spock was bent on self-flagellation.

Deciding, McCoy stood. "I've got to check on Jim. You wanna come with me?"

Spock rose and followed McCoy into Kirk's room. He stood silently watching the still form on the bed, while the Doctor checked the readings one more time.

"Is he unconscious?" Spock whispered.

"He's sleeping," McCoy assured. He pointed to the diagnostic panel. "See everything's in the normal range."

"But he's not breathing on his own," Spock noticed.

"We don't want to put extra exertion on his heart, so I'm keeping all activity to a minimum. Until his chest heals completely, breathing is an effort for him." McCoy explained patiently.

Spock stood watching the sleeping man until McCoy touched his arm. "C'mon you can visit him in the morning when he wakes up." Without objecting, Spock followed him out of the room.

Back in his office, McCoy yawned. "Spock, you and I have both had a long night. Why don't you go back to your quarters and get some sleep. I'll stretch out here on the couch so I can be nearby in case Jim needs me." He glanced longingly at the piece of furniture which would allow him a horizontal position.

Spock hesitated. "You go ahead and lie down if you're tired. I do not require sleep at this time. I shall go in and sit with the Captain while you rest."

"Oh, no... I can't sleep while you're perched on a chair at Jim's bedside," McCoy objected.

The look he received from Spock was determined. "Doctor, I do not wish to debate authority with you, but I do intend to remain here until an improvement in his condition can be ascertained."

The first retort that popped into McCoy's mind was 'You'd lose that debate. I'm the absolute authority in sickbay,' but peering closely at Spock he realized that this was not a test of control, but a worried old friend who still cloaked his fears in carefully chosen words. It was not so much a statement of challenge as a plea for understanding. As Spock stood before him vulnerable and, by his own choice, alone, McCoy became aware of something else in the couched features and impersonal sounding phrases. There

was a tenseness in Spock he had not seen for a long time, and since their return from Earth's past, the Vulcan, at Kirk's request, had made a concerted effort to use the Captain's given name. Tonight, McCoy had not heard him speak it once.

McCoy drew his gaze away, rubbing watery eyes with his fists. He yawned, deciding that if something were troubling Spock, the Vulcan did not intend to confide in him and would work it out on his own. He was just tired enough to be grateful and generous.

"Very well, Spock. Do what you want," he agreed. "He won't wake up for hours and he won't know you're there, but if you insist on wearing yourself out with an all-night vigil, don't let me stop you."

The physician watched as Spock headed for Kirk's bed in the adjoining room. There was a discernible slump to the retreating shoulders, a slowness in the gait that could be caused, he noted clinically, by worry, fatigue, age, or any number of unknown factors. McCoy suspected it was probably a combination of all those things.

Satisfied that Spock would be a more efficient warning alarm of danger to Kirk than any of his computerized monitors, McCoy stretched out his lean frame on the 'night-watch' couch installed for that purpose in his office. Exhausted as his body was, as weary as his mind was becoming, he discovered to his dismay that once allowed to relax, he couldn't. Purposefully, he closed his eyes, trying to shut out the niggling concerns for the critical patient in his care. Intellectually, he knew that an over-tired medical man would not be as efficient as necessary, should an unexpected emergency arrive. Yet he had spent so many similar nights on guard over one of those two men in the next room, while the other hovered nearby. He let his mind drift back... over the years....

... "Spock! No, don't look!" Too late, McCoy realized James Kirk had seen the visor that Spock/Kolos had left lying on Chekov's console. The sound which emitted from behind the shield was barely humanoid. The being which emerged was not sane. Unshielded Vulcan eyes had gazed on an entity too intense to bear and a brilliant mind had gone over the edge as powerful muscles fought to destroy, without reason, anyone who stood in his way. It had taken a blast from Kirk's own phaser set on heavy stun to subdue the raving maniac who had been their First Officer.

Distraught over what he had been forced to do, fearful for the life and mind of his friend, Kirk had followed the medics as they moved Spock to sickbay. He had waited nervously, been gently moved out of the way as McCoy proceeded with his examination. Finally, after what must have seemed to Kirk an interminably long time, McCoy put away his instruments and took the Captain by the elbow.

"Let's talk," he moved Kirk toward his office.

"Is he going to be all right?" It was the primary question in Kirk's thoughts.

McCoy sighed, hating what he had to say next, hating it because it would incur Kirk's wrath, and hating it because as a physician he was faced with the abominable feeling of helplessness and inadequacy.

"I don't know, Jim. I can't say for sure."

"What do you mean you... "

"Let me finish," McCoy forestalled the angry protest. "I'm just as upset as you are... "

"I doubt that... "

"Jim, shut up and let me talk." Frustration made the Doctor's words harsh, when his heart wanted to comfort an aching friend. "I know about as much about the Vulcan mind as a first year med student does about Altarian Hyperdistress Disorder. Now, I've studied Vulcan physiology and I can fix up most physical problems that Spock could come down with. But his mind, well that's another whole set of rules and regulations and I am just not qualified to play the game."

"You're telling me you can't help him?" Kirk was incredulous.

"Damn it, Jim, I'd give my right arm, no both arms, never perform surgery again, if I knew how to give him back his mind. You have to believe that." McCoy was anguished. "But it's gone so far down, all the tests I've run... there's nothing there. I don't know how to reach him. Whatever he saw when he looked at Kolos.... "

Kirk's knees seemed to go weak and he held on to McCoy for support. "I believe you, Bones," he said gently. "But there has to be a way, has to be someone... "

"Perhaps if we send him back to Vulcan, the healers... " McCoy considered.

"Miranda!" Kirk said suddenly. "She knows how to reach him!"

"She won't," McCoy called but Kirk was already out the door. Then again if anyone can convince her... he decided.

Miranda had been in with Spock a long time. Kirk paced the corridor and the office; McCoy kept him company. There was nothing else he could do. He pushed down his own fear, his own concern over what was happening in the other room, to let Kirk work out his emotions.

"If I've lost a good officer because of that woman... "

"Now, wait a minute, she didn't cause Spock to forget the visor," McCoy played devil's advocate.

"Maybe not," Kirk conceded, "and maybe so. You said yourself she was jealous of Spock, hated him. I can't help feeling that she was in some way responsible."

"But she's trying to help him now."

"We hope so, but we can't be sure. Maybe I should go in there." It was at least the third time Kirk had suggested that action.

McCoy touched his arm. "Let's give her a little more time."

"That's easy for you to say. You won't have to replace the best First Officer in the Fleet if she's not successful."

There it was again, McCoy noted. Not for the first time, Kirk had covered his true concern for his friend by referring to Spock as a valuable officer. Kirk could be as reticent as the Vulcan when it came to admitting friendship and personal feelings. He watched as Kirk continued to pace, continued to peer down the hall, as if by willing it he could make Miranda emerge and declare Spock cured. Time crawled by on the chronometer. Once, Uhura called from the bridge. Kolos was trying to get a message to Miranda. He wanted to know Spock's condition. Kirk replied that there was nothing to report. The call disturbed the Captain anew and he worried aloud over the decision to place Spock's psyche in the hands of an envious woman. McCoy reminded Kirk that she had also appeared as intelligent, compassionate and more than capable of fulfilling any task she set upon. And she had agreed to try to help Spock.

Then suddenly, finally, a figure which looked as though it had returned from hell appeared in the doorway. Kirk and McCoy both made a grab for him and pushed him gently into a chair. Kirk had moved to the doorway, scanning the corridor for Miranda while McCoy ran the scanner over his pointed-ear patient. Miranda had disappeared. Kirk returned to Spock's side and glanced expectantly at McCoy.

"Readings are all normal. He appears weak but recovered," the Doctor reported.

"Spock, how do you feel?" Kirk touched the other's arm, needing reassurance.

"I... believe I am... undamaged, Captain." Spock did not sound totally convincing.

"That's not an answer to Jim's question," McCoy grumbled. "Are you in pain?"

"I... I have a slight headache."

"That's an understatement," McCoy checked the scanner. "The pain indicator... "

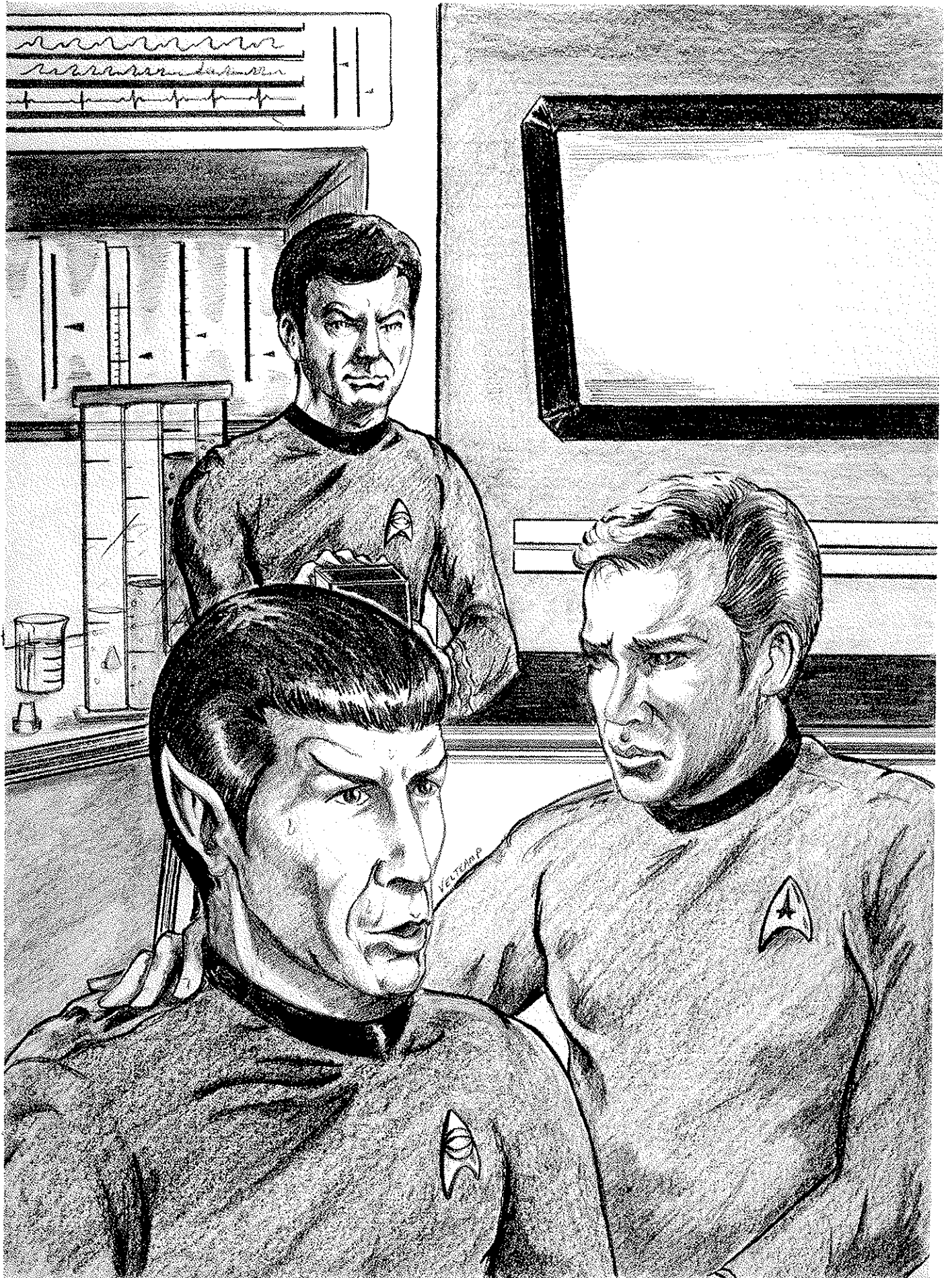
"Bones, maybe Spock should lie down," Kirk intercepted the forthcoming scolding. "Spock, are you certain you're all right?"

"Aside from the headache, as the Doctor has noted, I would say I am once again functional, thanks to Ms. Jones."

"Calling on Miranda was Jim's idea," McCoy told him.

"Then, I must say thanks to you as well," Spock offered Kirk.

"I was... worried about you. I... was afraid you might not come back." Kirk confessed.



"It appears it was indeed a possibility," Spock agreed.

"Spock," McCoy put in, "what did Miranda do in there? What brought you back?"

"She initiated a meld... she reached down to where my mind had retreated and... grabbed hold. She would not let go. She made me see... remember what had happened. It was a considerable risk to her." Spock explained.

"Then she has my gratitude," Kirk admitted. Spock looked up at him. Their gazes held for a long moment. "You are very... valuable to me," Kirk held the eye contact.

"Then, for that reason, I am pleased that she was successful," Spock's eyes dropped and he shuddered. McCoy moved toward him.

"Okay, that's it. You've had about as much as anyone could take today and now you need some good old-fashioned healing sleep."

"I do not..." Spock tried.

"Better listen to him," Kirk advised. "I could make it an order."

McCoy reached for Spock's arm and helped him to his feet. Gently, he led the Vulcan toward the door. Over his shoulder, he glanced at Kirk.

"Now, I'm going to tuck him in for a few hours and keep an eye on him while he's resting. Don't you think you could find something to do, like running the ship, while he's sleeping?"

Kirk grinned. "Is that a subtle suggestion that I leave your patient to you, Doctor?"

McCoy scowled. "I didn't realize I was being subtle."

"Very well," Kirk drew himself together. "I'll be on the bridge. I'll call you to check on his status in one hour."

"I don't doubt it," McCoy mumbled, as they headed toward Spock's sickbay cubicle. He knew Kirk was as good as his word; in one hour he would be on the intercom. Yet despite Kirk's concern for Spock, the Captain had kept his feelings silent. He would not or could not, McCoy knew, voice the pain he had really felt over Spock's injury, any more than Spock could admit the friendship he felt for Kirk. What a pair they are, McCoy realized....

... What a pair they still are. McCoy's eyes dragged open and he stared at the ceiling. Twenty-five years together and we're all still afraid to admit how we feel. We come close to it -- he remembered the conversation around the campfire at Yosemite -- but we still hedge.

There had been other times. The memories played back on McCoy's consciousness like an edited video tape where only certain scenes from a story are strung together to make a specific point. Kirk standing tense and worried while the Doctor examined the gunshot wound Spock received on Neural, or cringing in silent empathy while he watched the pain indicators reveal what Deneva's parasite was doing to a Vulcan. McCoy recalled

the horrified disbelief with which Kirk had received the information that Spock's brain had been removed, and the quiet determination in his voice when he had told McCoy of his intention to go to Vulcan to save a friend's life.

Spock was just as bad, driving the ship and himself beyond exhaustion to locate the Captain who had disappeared into an obelisk, and risking himself and his career to rescue that same man from a planet so overpopulated they had wanted Kirk to provide a means to death.

McCoy's tired mind played it all out for him, and he remembered the many times when he knew he had been the object of his friends' concern as well. Yet through it all, while they risked career and sanity and life itself to save the other, they had been unable to risk that part of themselves in which they kept their private feelings and hidden pasts. Each had kept his secrets — secrets which Sybok sought to expose — secrets which caused pain too deep to share even with a best friend.

Kirk had still fought to keep his pain hidden when forced to witness the agony endured by Spock and McCoy when revealing their innermost shame. These thoughts disturbed McCoy and he knew sleep was impossible, annoyed that unbidden his mind had taken such a turn. It had been the way Spock looked as he had headed toward Kirk's bedside that caused these dreary thoughts. McCoy reflected that planning his next vacation or fantasizing a beautiful young assistant would have been more conducive to sleep than worrying about a restrained Vulcan and reticent Captain had been.

Resigned, McCoy pushed himself up off the couch and crossed to the doorway, where a view of his two friends was afforded him. Spock sat stiffly in a chair near the head of Kirk's bed. His arms were folded in his lap; his gaze seemed to be on the steady rising and falling of his friend's chest. Occasionally, he glanced at the diagnostic panel over the bed. Kirk seemed to be sleeping peacefully. Once in a while, the Human's eyes moved beneath closed lids, but all else was still. Like a benevolent voyeur, McCoy watched for a while.



James Kirk's breathing was regular, but not for the first time Spock worried how efficient it would be if it were not for the machine which assisted the injured man. He checked the readings one more time to satisfy himself that all was normal. Kirk was so quiet, so still. Spock would have endured the Captain's anger, even his apparent disappointment in an old friend, to have this silent form well and running the ship in his usual enthusiastic manner. Spock knew he would sacrifice anything, say anything or do anything he could, if it would make Kirk able to walk away from the threat now hanging over his life.

Yet it was too late. Spock had held his secrets too long and his unwillingness to reveal himself to Kirk had ultimately caused the situation which now existed. Painfully, Spock wondered if there were any way to rectify the damage he had done. Certainly being more open in the future, as Kirk had implied, might forestall any more incidents, and Spock had already resolved to comply. Still, that did nothing to repair the present nightmare.

When he had last spoken with Kirk, the Captain had been more than a little upset with him. Now Spock feared he might not get the chance to make amends, to assure Kirk of his intentions to change, to be as honest as Kirk expected him to be. Spock remembered that once before they had parted with unresolved differences between them,

and it had been over two Earth years before they had met again. Part of it had been stubbornness, part misunderstanding. A crisis to the galaxy had brought them together then. Now, a more personal crisis might prevent a reconciliation.

Spock reached out tentatively and covered Kirk's hand with his own. "Jim... Jim... please — don't die. I... I need... need you." He swallowed, forcing out the awkward words. "You are my... dearest friend. I... didn't mean to... to be... dishonest with you. I... know I... should have... told you about Sybok." Spock drew in a breath, continuing. "You... you are my true... brother... more than any by birth could be... "

Kirk's eyes fluttered and he moved his head toward the sound of Spock's voice.

"Spock? What... are you saying?" he managed.

Surprised that Kirk was awake, Spock squeezed the hand he was covering. "Jim, don't try to talk. Doctor McCoy said you needed rest."

Kirk tried for a deep breath, failed. "Hard... hard to breathe... "

"You're being assisted while your chest heals."

"Spock... I... I... want to... " Kirk grimaced as pain seemed to lance through his chest. He raised his free hand to prevent Spock from interrupting, "... say to you... " he continued, determined.

Spock could take it no more. "Please," he broke in, "do not tax yourself. You can tell me whatever you wish when you are stronger. You must save your breath."

Weakly, Kirk nodded and let his hand drop to the bed. For a few moments both men were still, then deciding, Spock withdrew his hand. Kirk turned his face toward him, seeming to ask with his eyes why Spock had done so.

"I... I do not wish to upset you," Spock began. "Perhaps I should go."

Kirk shook his head. "No."

"Then... then may I speak? Will you just listen?"

Kirk smiled, nodding.

"I... apologize for not telling you about my brother. It... it is my fault that this has happened to you."

Kirk frowned. "No," he protested.

"You promised to listen."

"But... but you're wrong... " A cough seized him. Spock leaned forward, taking his shoulders and pressing him gently against the pillow.

"Jim... Jim... easy." Alarm made Spock's voice shake.

From the doorway, unnoticed, McCoy started to move forward, but Kirk appeared to calm at once, so he held his place.

"It's... it's... all right... " Kirk wheezed.

Spock released his hold on Kirk, but did not move away, fearful that Kirk might hurt himself further. The Captain's breathing gradually evened out. "I'm... sorry," he whispered. "Go on, Spock."

Assured for the moment that Kirk was in no immediate danger, Spock took his seat once more, leaning close to the man in the bed.

"I know I was wrong... have been wrong to keep personal information from you... I understand that friendship... must be based on... trust, and by not revealing all to you, you would believe that I did not trust you enough with my... feelings." Spock swallowed. The words were difficult to express.

Kirk reached out and touched his hand. "May I... say something... now?" he breathed softly.

Spock lowered his gaze. "You had every right... have every right to be angry with me." Once begun, he felt he had to get it all out or he would never have the courage again. "I want you to know how I... feel about... you. I... "

"Spock... please... stop for a minute... " Kirk tried to make his voice assertive, but Spock was not listening.

"... have only taken in the past... now I will give my... friendship... whatever you require... want... I will... "

"Spock!" The name came out harsh and precipitated a fit of coughing. Spasms shook Kirk as he fought to catch his breath. Spock grabbed for him, felt the quaking body grow weak under his hands. Wildly he looked around for help as a buzzer sounded broadcasting cardiac distress. He saw McCoy barreling toward him, pushing him aside to reach Kirk.

"Move, Spock... what did you do... what did you say to him?" McCoy was laying Kirk out flat, throwing out thoughtless accusations even as he worked.

Terrified, Spock moved out of the way, his gaze on the indicator that showed Kirk's heart had stopped. An emergency team arrived to assist McCoy. Spock was all but unnoticed in their race to save Kirk. McCoy administered the heart stimulant and Kirk's body responded. The computer registered a weak but steady heartbeat. The physicians continued to work on the patient. At one point, McCoy looked up toward where Spock still stood.

"Spock, get the hell out of here now. I'll talk to you later," he ordered none too gently.

Spock would not be deterred. "Will he live, Doctor?"

"How the hell do I know. Do I look like God to you? Do Vulcans even believe in God?"

Spock straightened his shoulders, his eyes growing dark. "I can assure you that any god Vulcans believe in would not look like you." His gaze took on a warning. "Save him, McCoy." Spock turned to leave the room.

"Damn you," McCoy managed to mutter behind him before his attention was called back to Kirk.

Eventually, McCoy felt that Kirk was stable enough to be left alone. The monitors were again showing normal readings and the attack, while threatening and frightful, had apparently done no significant or lasting damage. Kirk was once more sleeping quietly and McCoy vowed this time nothing would jeopardize the needed healing rest.

McCoy had gone beyond the point of exhaustion and a reserve supply of adrenaline had kicked in during the crisis. He was keyed-up, feeling a bit hyperactive and knowing he'd pay for it in a few hours when all this false energy caught up with him. Despite the second wind he was experiencing, McCoy's spirits did a nose-dive as he entered his office. Not unexpectedly, he found Spock waiting for him.

"Are you still here?" Above all else, McCoy was not up to dealing with Spock. He knew he had been sharp with the Vulcan, but at that time he hadn't cared. His whole being had been geared to treating Kirk and he could not be bothered humoring. Besides, without having actually heard what Spock had said to Kirk, he could tell that whatever it was had upset the injured man. He suspected that Spock had been getting that damned imagined guilt off his chest at Kirk's expense.

"Where else would I be?" To Spock it must have been obvious.

"While Jim's incapacitated, aren't you in charge of the ship? Don't you have something to do, check on, fill out..."

"I have been in contact with the departments. The Enterprise is in Federation territory on its way to a Star Base. There is nothing that requires my immediate attention at this time... except to determine the Captain's condition."

"What did you say to him, Spock? It obviously made him agitated. I thought you were just going to sit in there with him. I didn't know you were going to start giving him that bull about being responsible for his accident."

Spock scowled. "What I had to say to him was between the Captain and myself. You still have not told me how he is."

McCoy sighed. "He'll be all right." He saw the look of relief that Spock did not even attempt to conceal and all at once the fear, the anger went out of him. They both loved Kirk, McCoy knew. Through all the years their lives were entwined. "Spock, what happened in there?" McCoy asked gently. "I wasn't trying to listen, but I couldn't sleep and I looked in on the two of you and I could see that you were talking earnestly about something. Then Jim began coughing."

Spock lowered his head. "I did not mean to upset him. I... hoped to offer reassurance."

There was something in Spock's manner that sent an alert to McCoy. Something was going on he didn't know about. "I don't understand," he ventured.

"I... wanted Jim to know," Spock began, "how I felt. I wanted him to believe that I could be... honest with him."

Inwardly, McCoy cringed at Spock's pain. Then he remembered Chapel telling him that Spock had wanted to meet with him. "You said that to him?" Spock nodded. "Spock, did something happen before Jim was hurt? Did he say something to you?"

"As always, only the truth," Spock admitted. "He was... justifiably angry at my lack of confidence in him."

"You mean not telling him about your brother?"

"Among other things. My unwillingness to confide in him... to tell him how I... feel about things has caused him much difficulty. I have resolved to correct that," Spock had made up his mind.

"Well," McCoy considered carefully. "I appreciate your intent but I don't know that you're going about it in the right way."

Spock seemed to make a decision. "What... what would you consider 'the right way'?"

McCoy moved to sit behind his desk before he answered. "Spock, we've all three been friends for a long time. Mostly it seems that we understand each other pretty well without the need to verbalize. And that's damn fortunate 'cause we all appear to have trouble putting our thoughts -- and feelings -- into words even after all this time."

"Friends should not keep secrets from each other, if I understand the concept," Spock argued.

"Yes, I know, but haven't we all been guilty of that? So you didn't tell Jim about Sybok and he got pissed at you when he found out about it. Did you know about Sam until we went to Deneva, or Areel Shaw until she showed up to prosecute Jim? Did either of you know anything about my wife Ariana until I received the message of her death,* or how I felt about my father's death until Sybok made me relive it?"

"But the appearance of Sybok nearly cost Jim his life -- twice. Likewise our encounter with T'Pol and his first meeting of my parents..."

"Well... you have more volatile people in your background," McCoy caught the look of protest from Spock. "Okay, I was just trying to make a joke. Seriously, though, I understand what you're saying. Maybe you haven't made the right choices where opening up to Jim is concerned. But I do know this, Spock, despite whatever he said to you in anger, he does trust your friendship and he doesn't expect -- or even want -- you to change."

McCoy remembered Kirk looking alone and frightened while Spock lay critical from a gunshot wound. 'Bones, I need someone with me whose judgment I can trust as much as Spock,' the young Captain had said. McCoy had known then it wasn't scientific or tactical judgment he had been speaking of. Kirk had needed a trusted friend at his side, then -- and now -- and his first choice was and always would be Spock. McCoy knew that fact was true, and it was a comfortable feeling. The affection that he and

* The Hidden Truth, B. Volker/N. Kippax, Galactic Discourse 3.

Kirk had for each other was deep, sincere, and lifelong. But the bond between Spock and Kirk had only its roots in friendship. They truly completed each other, two halves of a whole.

"Look," McCoy advised, "why don't you just try cooling your heels about talking to Jim until he's recovered. Then tell him how you feel about what's happened and what you want to do about it. See if he agrees with you."

Spock considered, "He will recover?"

"I told you he will."

"Then, if this is your... opinion of what to do to," Spock agreed. "I will comply."

"I'm glad to hear that, Spock." McCoy waited for Spock to make a move to leave. Finally, "Don't you think you could try to let me and my patient get some rest now?" he urged.

Spock glanced uncertainly toward Kirk's room, then decided. "Very well. I shall be in my quarters if I'm needed." He strode toward the outer door. "Thank you, McCoy," he added, leaving quickly before the physician could reply.

James Kirk drew a deep breath, grateful to be able to do so, and stared morosely at the stack of paperwork on his desk. Ever since his release from sickbay two days earlier, McCoy had kept him on a strictly monitored exercise program to restrengthen his heart. Aside from the timed workouts in the gym, the Doctor seemed to feel the only "work" he was up to employed a desk, stylus and reams of reports-in-triplicate. Thus every department, having been advised of their Captain's early release due to badgering the ship's entire medical staff about boredom and inactivity being detrimental to full recovery, resolved to keep the Captain busy with less than strenuous physical labor. They all submitted daily memos for his consideration, reports for his approval, requisitions for his signature, and inventory lists for his files.

The door to Kirk's cabin buzzed. His answered "come" was less than cordial, then he decided any interruption was welcome. He glanced up as Spock came through the entry.

"Where is my yeoman?" he hoped Spock could help him out of his current problem. "I'm supposed to have a yeoman to help out with all this," he indicated the paperwork scattered across his desk.

"Starfleet has not yet found a permanent yeoman to be assigned to you and all those aboard are either engaged elsewhere or are off-duty," Spock answered.

"Are we ever going to get this ship up to one hundred percent efficient capacity?" Kirk scowled.

"We are working on it," Spock reported.

Kirk hummed. "All right, Mister Spock, I suppose you have some reason for loitering around my quarters. I hope it's not to bring more clerical work that needs my attention."

"As a matter of fact, I came to offer my assistance. I could take half of that and..."

"You've been doing double-duty since McCoy's had me on the sicklist, trying to cover both your job and mine. What are you trying to do, land in sickbay yourself?"

"I assure you that has never been my intent," Spock denied quickly.

"You need to rest sometime, too. Even Vulcans have limits," Kirk scolded. Spock began a protest, "How much help to me do you think you'd be if you became ill?" It was an old argument.

"I... I did not consider those consequences," Spock confessed.

"You see," Kirk seized the admission. "That's your trouble, Spock, you never consider the consequences. You plunge ahead, unthinking, irregardless of the outcome, never giving it a thought."

Spock stiffened, apparently suddenly more than annoyed by Kirk's accusation, and certainly more than annoyed by his attitude in general. "I do not believe that I am the only one guilty of rushing into things without considering the risk to oneself."

Kirk looked at the Vulcan sharply, but Spock, having started, did not give him the chance to interrupt.

"I believe there is a certain legendary Starship Captain who has a penchant for getting himself into life-threatening situations which might have been avoided by more thought to his own safety first."

Kirk could not be still. "What would you have me do, sit safely in my command chair on the bridge while I sent others out to dangerous situations?"

"Yes."

The word fell into the room like the reverberation of a single strike to a massive gong. Kirk drew a breath, gazing levelly at the other man.

"I can't run a ship like that," he said gently.

"I know," the reply was equally quiet. Then, "I was afraid you were going to die." There was no need to explain; Kirk remembered the fear he had heard in Spock's voice so recently in sickbay.

"Spock, what happened in engineering was an accident. It was unforeseeable and unavoidable. I know you read Scotty's report," Kirk explained.

"Perhaps..."

"No, not perhaps. An accident."

"And the incident on ShaKaRee? You were almost killed. And the fall from El Capitan, because I interrupted your concentration..."

"You caught me, you saved my life."

"You were nearly killed by Kruge on Genesis, in fact there was a price on your head in the Empire because you went to Genesis to rescue me... "

"Spock... " Kirk tried to interrupt.

"You have risked your life, lost so much for me... "

"Damn it, stop!" Kirk stood up abruptly. "You're not responsible for my actions. I make my own choices, my own decisions. I am in control of my actions, my life." He moved around his desk so that he was very close to Spock. "Do you want me to list all the risks you've taken for me, for my ship, my career? This is not a contest. We're not keeping score. You want to talk guilt. I'm your superior officer. I've had to order you into life-threatening situations. How do you think I've dealt with that?"

Spock lowered his gaze. "If it were my duty, you had no choice."

"Exactly," Kirk took his friend by the shoulders, turning him slightly so that they faced each other. "But Spock, I've been terrified so many times when you were in jeopardy. And — when my worst fears came true, when you died in the reactor room... I thought... I wasn't sure how I could handle that... but... but it was your choice... you did what you felt you had to and... and I had to accept that. You and I both know, after all these years, that this is not a safe profession we've chosen. All things considered, though, we've been lucky."

"Jim, you were right to be angry with me about Sybok," Spock wanted him to know.

"Yes," Kirk considered. "I was, but that doesn't mean I hold you responsible for everything that happened. That would be like saying that if I got struck by lightning, it was your fault because you didn't tell me it was going to storm. The warning might have kept me from going out in the rain but it couldn't have controlled the lightening after I was out there. And sometimes lightning strikes even when you've taken all the precautions."

"An interesting analogy," Spock smiled slightly.

Kirk returned the smile with his own grin. "Why don't we put this behind us. You're sorry you didn't tell me about Sybok, I'm sorry I ordered you to shoot your brother. Maybe this all has taught us something about being open with each other."

"Doctor McCoy said we have indeed all been guilty of keeping secrets," Spock admitted.

"You talked to Bones about this?"

Spock nodded. "I thought he might be able to advise me how to change, to be the kind of friend you wanted."

Kirk was unbelieving. "Don't you know? I don't want you to change. You are the kind of friend I want."

"I believe I know, now."

Kirk squeezed Spock's arm. "Good." He sighed, moving away, his gaze returning reluctantly to the paperwork on his desk. Suddenly he brightened.

"You know, my friend, our last camping trip was cut short. We're almost back at Earth and after we dispose of the last of our passengers, Scott's going to have to see to some repairs before our next assignment. I'll bet we could talk Bones into another trip to Yosemite."

Spock looked frightened, "You would want to climb El Capitan again?"

Kirk considered, then shook his head. "No, I think a nice quiet restful vacation would be in order this time. I think our Doctor would have his own kind of hysterics if I suggested any activity that strenuous."

Spock relaxed, "May I tell you a secret?"

"I'm all ears," Kirk was intrigued.

"I am really not too fond of marshmallows."

Kirk nodded, thoughtfully. "I suppose they are an acquired taste. How do you feel about 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat?'"

"It is simple, but pleasant," Spock acknowledged.

Kirk punched his intercom. A familiar face appeared on the screen. "Doctor McCoy, can you report to my quarters. Mister Spock and I have something to discuss with you." He winked at the pointed-eared companion who was the 'noblest part of himself.'



"The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few... or the one."

The needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many... "



Admiral James T. Kirk and
Captain Spock
Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan
Star Trek III: The Search for Spock

There Will Be No Peace

By: Ginna LaChoir

Art by: Christine Myers

It took just a flip of his communicator and they were no longer alone. Outside that... thing... was waiting, but inside, however briefly, they were safe as the familiar voice crackled over the communicator.

"Scotty here, sir."

Kirk breathed a silent sigh of relief, although the knot in his stomach did not diminish. He took a deep breath. "Please tell me the transporter is working.... "

"It's got partial power, sir. We might be able to take two of you."

Two -- not all, but the most important. With no hesitation, Kirk heard himself say the words he eerily remembered saying before, but never with this sense of foreboding. "Beam up Spock and Dr. McCoy now!"

McCoy's objection came, but too late. Years of experience had taught the Chief Engineer not to question his captain's orders, and the sparkle of the transporter enveloped Kirk's two friends even as the Doctor's protest sounded in Kirk's ears, and echoed through the now empty cabin. **Now just a damned minute....**

The silence was all consuming, and Kirk was alone. Whatever was out there was trying to kill him, and he knew he could die. He sensed from Scotty's words that rescue for him might not be coming. He found himself praying that if it happened, Spock would find some way of saving the Enterprise and her crew. With Sybok dead, his followers would be unlikely to cause any more trouble....

The door to the shuttle suddenly crashed open and a long arm of white fire shot through the cabin to the place where Kirk had been standing, but instinct found him already gone. He hesitated as he left the shuttle, knowing he would be pursued, but hoping against hope that perhaps the entity would soon tire of him -- when two blinding flashes of energy shot by him. The entity's fury had not died. He turned and ran.

There was no more time to think, only time for a finely honed survival instinct to take over. However, there was nowhere to run on that god forsaken planet. He reached the cliffs and started to climb. Blinding shots of white death sparked around him. Was the entity toying with him, feeding on his terror, or was it so blindly furious that the

accuracy of its deadly rays was being affected? He did not know, but he would keep running.

Then it was there -- the face of death horribly contorted in its rage and its singular quest -- his death. It hovered there, mocking him, making him wait, lusting in its revenge for eons of perceived wrongs.

Kirk stood erect, waiting for death. He was as alone as he had ever been in his life. His friends were up there somewhere, obviously unable to help. He silently bade them farewell, telling Spock that it was not his fault, knowing it would do no good -- knowing that his friend would never forgive his death if he could possibly have done something to prevent it.

Suddenly the sky was filled by a huge Klingon bird of prey. The entity reared back as Kirk spun around, expecting the white beam of death to reach out and pierce him, only to see the awful face of his enemy being blasted by the energy of the Klingon weapons and disappear, never again to be able to inflict terror and death.

Kirk looked up. The Klingon bird of prey still hovered over him. If they were here, then the Enterprise must be... No, it could not be gone... But it must, for he was still alone... and the Klingons were here, and their weapons were turning on him.

He knew he shouted something and had raised his fist in defiance, but at the same time he felt a strange sense of defeat. If the Klingons were here, the Enterprise was not. Something had happened to his ship -- they would never have left him knowing the Klingons were there, and if she had not left, then she was....

The transporter beam took hold of him and the planet vanished from his sight, to be replaced by two armed Klingon warriors in full battle dress. For one of the few times in his life, Kirk felt small and helpless as he was pulled down from the transporter platform -- so like the platform of the ship that they had commandeered from that other Klingon in their mad race to save Spock's life -- a time that seemed so long ago. He felt a trembling go through his body, and felt the sweat break out on his face. Was it a reaction from this last brush with death, or what he was about to face? Unbidden, and unwanted, came the words of the Klingon ambassador from the tape that he had been shown after his court-martial. **There will be no peace as long as Kirk lives!**

Somehow the Klingons had destroyed the Enterprise and now they would have their revenge with him. And, for a moment, he found he no longer had any fight -- for a moment he no longer cared. Too much had happened too soon. On top of death there had been more death, and no one was left. He was alone.

First Koord was there -- and then Spock. Kirk drank in the sight of the Vulcan standing so tall across the bridge -- and smug? Kirk did not care. He stumbled slightly as he started forward and suddenly all the fear drained out of him until his knees felt like water. He was dimly aware that death had been cheated yet again. He had faced an unknown entity, knowing he would die alone, just as he had felt the hand of death as he had been beamed aboard the bird of prey. Only he had not been alone at all -- Spock had been there.

Spock mistook Kirk's reaching out as he came near the Vulcan. Kirk needed more than the reassurance of the hug he had started to reach for, he badly needed something to hold onto. Now that the adrenaline was no longer pounding through his body, Kirk was aware of growing weakness and a sharp pain that was centered in the middle of his

chest -- in the same area that was showing blackened marks of their attacker -- a reminder of the kind of damage the entity was willing to inflict to achieve his twisted goals.

Kirk straightened, somehow, after an unsuccessful attempt to look over his shoulder at the Klingons that Spock had warned him about. He looked back at the Vulcan, a slight smile of acknowledgment on his own lips as he bent his head and self-consciously straightened his tunic, giving himself a few seconds to steel himself from the collapse he knew was coming. The smile faded from his lips as he looked into the still smiling brown eyes of his friend. "I need Bones," he said under his breath. "Badly."

Spock stiffened at Kirk's words and all laughter fled from his face. The situation must be serious if Kirk admitted the need. He looked up from his captain's paling face and his eyes held Koord's. "Our mission has been accomplished, General," he said. "My Captain and I are due back on the Enterprise. I assume you would prefer to stay here with your people?"

To Spock's relief, Koord instantly understood what the Vulcan had not said. "There will be no further problem from here, Commander," he said. Koord was silent for a moment, obviously wrestling with himself, then he stepped forward a little away from his companions. "I thank you, Commander," he said quietly.

An arched eyebrow rose slightly.

"For giving me back to myself."

"We all become lost at some point in our lives, sir," Spock replied solemnly. "We owe each other what help we can give."

"Believe that it will be returned," Koord said gravely.

As the Klingon spoke, Spock unobtrusively slid his arm around Kirk and without making it obvious, managed to balance most of Kirk's weight against his Vulcan strength. "Would you like me to contact the Enterprise, Captain?" he asked.

Kirk nodded. He was not entirely certain he could speak without groaning, and he refused to show weakness in front of an enemy.

Spock reached back and got out his communicator, flipping it open with a smooth movement as he brought it forward. "Spock to Mr. Scott.... "

"Scotty here, sir." By the quickness of the reply, Spock knew the Engineer had been waiting with communications open.

"The transporter," Spock began without much hope. He knew he was supporting most of Kirk's weight and was not sure there would be time to get him down to the Klingon transporter room before the Captain collapsed.

"Fully repaired and locked onto you, Mr. Spock."

Mentally congratulating the Engineer, Spock took a swift glance at Kirk's pale face and quickly lifted the communicator. "Energize.... "

As the two figures materialized on the transporter pad, Kirk slumped against the Vulcan, his face growing paler and his eyes screwed shut from the pain. Spock slid both arms around Kirk's waist as he looked over at Scott, noting the jubilation at seeing Kirk alive quickly changing to deep concern as Scott took in the sight of Kirk in near collapse. "Contact sickbay," Spock said brusquely. "Tell Dr. McCoy to get here as soon as he can. He may need a medical team as well."

"He's been waiting by the shuttlebay," Scott said hurriedly as he hit the communications panel. "He dinna believe the transporter would be working again." He leaned forward over the panel. "Dr. McCoy to transporter room 6," he said urgently into the communicator. "Dr. McCoy, to transporter room 6 on the double!" He hit another button. "Sickbay -- send an emergency team and gurney to transporter room 6 immediately! Dr. McCoy will meet you here."

"Spock...." Kirk's voice was weak but still held authority. "Just let me sit down. I'll be all right."

Spock looked at Kirk with skepticism. "That is not what you said back on the Klingon bird of prey."

"A momentary weakness," Kirk said with a slight smile. "Things came at me a little fast over there." He looked at the Vulcan. "I really do need to sit down before I fall."

Spock helped him sit at the edge of the transporter platform, but stayed with a ready hand outstretched in case Kirk should need more visible support. "Dr. McCoy should be here momentarily," he volunteered as if Kirk had not heard Scott using the communication system.

"Thanks," Kirk said briefly. He looked over at Scotty. "You needn't look so worried, Mr. Scott, I'm here in one piece, although maybe a little black and blue."

"You had us a wee bit worried, Captain," Scotty said, emotion evident in his tone.

"As I was about all of you," Kirk replied. "Status report on the ship?"

"She's fine, sir. Most systems are up to par. Those that aren't are minor problems."

Kirk nodded, then looked up at Spock. "Klingons?"

"As far as I have been able to tell, Captain, this particular ship came after you in order to obtain their own place in history, unauthorized by their Empire, according to Koord."

Kirk was silent for a moment. "Unauthorized, perhaps, but maybe only because their captain neglected to apprise the Empire of his intentions."

Just then the door burst open and McCoy came flying in. "Jim, what happened to you? What did that insane creature do? Did the Klingons do anything...."

"Hang in there, Bones," Kirk protested. "Nothing happened that you weren't witness to, apart from a rather large adrenaline surge caused by the Klingons." He

touched his chest gingerly. "I feel a little messed up in this area. Must have happened when I challenged that alien, and it took such exception to it."

McCoy had his scanner out in an instant and ran it over Kirk. He frowned as he read the results. "I can see why you're sitting down," he said in an undertone. He glanced up at Spock. "How are you doing?"

"I am unaffected, Doctor," Spock said quietly.

"Like hell you are," McCoy countered. "You may be able to control pain, but your reading is also shooting off the scale." He frowned, "Much as I hate to admit it, I'm glad that damned thing didn't shoot at me!" As he spoke, the medical team arrived. "Good timing," McCoy said as he reached out for the emergency kit. He programmed a hypo and pressed it against Kirk's arm. "Breathe deep for a few minutes, Jim," he said softly. "This will allow me to get you to sickbay under your own power. I'll do a better check once you're there." He got to his feet. "You can take that stuff back to sickbay," he said to the waiting team. "I'll come with the Captain in a few minutes."

Kirk watched the medical team leave, then looked at McCoy with a quizzical expression. "People are a little nervous around here at the moment," McCoy explained. "A lot of strange things have been happening that they don't understand.... "

"And you don't think seeing the Captain being wheeled through the corridors would be a good idea just now," Kirk finished for him.

McCoy nodded but said nothing.

"Just what is the situation?" Kirk asked when he realized that McCoy was not going to explain further.

They all looked at each other. "I'm not certain, Captain," Scotty said finally. "I've been tinkering with this cranky transporter all through this whole mess, except for when I freed you from yon brig."

Kirk looked up at Spock. "Well?"

Spock shook his head. "I am uncertain, Captain. Mr. Scott beamed us up from the shuttlecraft, and from there General Koord and I transported over to the bird of prey to await your arrival."

Kirk looked at McCoy. "Well, Doctor?"

McCoy looked uncomfortable. "Well, at the moment I think we have a mixture of some people who are appalled by their behavior, and others who are completely confused by what has happened."

"Meaning the crew and our, how shall I put it, 'guests' I assume," said Spock dryly.

McCoy nodded, but again said nothing.

Kirk shook his head. "Not a pretty picture," he commented. He looked up at Spock. "We have to get back across the barrier," he said. "That's the first order of business."

"Agreed," said the Vulcan.

"Wrong," McCoy said firmly. "The first order of business is to get you down to sickbay and put you back together."

Kirk opened his mouth to protest, then shut it again. He knew he was in worse shape than he was willing to admit, and he also knew it was imperative that he stay on his feet. There were Klingons out on his starboard side who were not to be trusted, even if they **had** saved his life -- and then there was the matter of the barrier. They had penetrated it once, but he somehow had the feeling that getting back was not going to prove as easy. There was no explanation for this vague foreboding, but he had long since learned to listen to those feelings that warned him of danger. "Fair enough, Bones," he said finally. He looked over at Scotty. "Get up to the bridge, Mr. Scott. I want a full report of everything you think needs reporting."

"Aye, sir," Scotty said.

"Captain, I.... " Spock started.

Kirk shook his head. "No, Spock, you're coming to sickbay. McCoy says you're hurt, and I want to know how badly. Besides, I need to talk with you."

"I'm glad someone's listening to reason," McCoy said with a note of satisfaction in his voice as Scotty disappeared out the door. He looked at Kirk. "How are you feeling?"

Kirk slowly rose to his feet. "Whatever you gave me, I wish you'd do it more often. I feel great!"

"Well, you're not cured," McCoy warned, "and when that shot wears off, you'll probably wish you were dead. Come on, let's get going."



The young Klingon officer ran into the room, his face flushed. "The message has arrived, m'lord," he said as he came to a halt and saluted the Klingon High Commissioner.

"Kirk?"

"Yes, sir. It has been confirmed."

The High Commissioner nodded. "It is time." He turned to the lieutenant. "You know the message to be sent?"

The young officer had been waiting hours to send it -- the words were seared into his brain. "Yes, sir," he said eagerly.

"Repeat it!"

"Yes, sir." The Lieutenant cleared his throat. "It is to go to the elite force already sent into the quadrant near Nimbus Three, and reads as follows. Special orders from the Empire High Command to General Keb. Proceed to Nimbus Three with battleforce. Be prepared to seek out and find U.S.S. Enterprise commanded by Captain James T. Kirk. Follow previous orders concerning General Koord, but primary mission is to eliminate Kirk by any means necessary, even if it causes General Koord's death. The

Empire dares to launch such a mission only once, so do not return to base until it has been completed. By order of Kall, High Commissioner."

"See to it," Kall said.

"Yes, sir. It will be sent immediately."

Kall turned to look out the window at the desolate landscape of the Empire's home planet. "Finally it has begun. Kirk will bother us no more!"



McCoy turned away from the large computer and looked through the doorway at Kirk who was still lying on the diagnostic table. Although Kirk was obviously in a great deal of pain, he was still alert and talking to Spock in a quiet voice. Not wanting to interrupt what could be a private conversation, McCoy cleared his throat noisily as he walked back into the main area of sickbay.

Kirk looked over at him. "Well, am I going to live, Doctor?" he asked with a slight smile.

McCoy looked at the dark mark on Kirk's chest, identical to the one that marked his back, then shook his head. "Whatever power went through you, Jim, made a real mess."

"Serious?"

McCoy hesitated for a minute. "No, at least not yet. You've been burned on the outside and badly bruised on the inside. There is some internal bleeding -- the kind one would expect to find when someone's been hit by a speeding moonbus." He looked at Kirk. "You're in delicate condition, Jim. If you stay here flat on your back, I can vouch for your condition."

Kirk frowned. "What about Spock?"

McCoy glanced at the Vulcan. "Same thing, only to a lesser degree, but I'm glad you're not planning on competing in a shot put contest any time soon, Spock."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Why would I suddenly decide to heave a large iron ball over a specified distance now when I have never been drawn to try such a thing at any prior time in my life?" he asked, genuinely interested.

"Never mind, Spock," McCoy protested. He looked back at Kirk. "I've run preliminary tests and so far I can't find any type of energy the entity threw at you that isn't already recorded in my computer, but that doesn't mean I won't. You saw what it did to Sybok."

Kirk noted the look of pain that briefly touched Spock's face. You're hurting, he thought. You saw your brother die, and you have not had time to grieve. Damn, I've not allowed myself to think of how you'd feel, and right now I don't have time to try to help, except to keep you distracted. He looked back at McCoy. "Doctor, the first order of business is to get us out of here and back across the barrier. Starfleet is going to be wondering where we've gotten ourselves to and if I know Bob Caflisch -- if he doesn't hear from us soon -- all of Starfleet is going to be in a real uproar.... "

"Appears to me he was pretty high on you a few days ago," McCoy said dryly, knowing that Kirk had something else on his mind, but he was not going to say what it was.

Kirk grinned, but did not answer. He knew McCoy realized he was stalling, but was grateful he did not put up more of an argument. He looked at Spock. "I think we'd better get up to the bridge and see what the situation is." He turned back to McCoy. "Keep things warm in here, Bones. We may need you."

"What for?" McCoy asked suspiciously.

"I honestly don't know," Kirk said slowly as he started to pull on his shirt. "Just a feeling." He took his uniform jacket from Spock's hand. "Come on, let's get back to work."

With a sinking feeling, McCoy watched the two men walk out of sickbay. He had been witness to Kirk's hunches too often. Something was bothering Kirk -- something serious, but until he worked it out to his own satisfaction, he would not share it with anyone else, save possibly Spock. All McCoy could do was to sit around and be ready for the casualties.



As the turbolift doors closed behind them, Kirk turned to Spock. "How did we get through the barrier?" he asked bluntly. "We've been to the one surrounding our galaxy and we know its dangers. This one was supposed to be much more dangerous."

Spock shook his head. "I do not know," he admitted. "The center of the galaxy is recorded as being protected by immense thermal radiation -- high energy X and gamma rays. How Sybok brought the ship through I cannot understand, considering the extreme sensory distortion that occurs when a ship passes through even minor radiation."

Kirk looked at him steadily. "My thoughts exactly, yet we are here, and as far as any of us knows, no one has shown up with increased psionic powers."

"None that have been reported, anyway," agreed Spock.

"None that have been reported," Kirk echoed, "which makes me think my guess is right."

"Guess?"

Kirk looked at Spock. "That we are still **in** the barrier, that whatever that alien thing was, it lived **within** the field surrounding the center of the galaxy, not in the center as we supposed. This is the same kind of radiation we met at the edge of the galaxy, only many times higher in number. Someone **should** have been affected, and I think that nothing has happened simply because we haven't come back out."

"You forget, Captain, that the Kelvans took the Enterprise through the barrier, and we brought it back with no ill effect on anyone."

"The ship was altered, Spock, and it suffered so much damage on its second crossing that there was no way anyone could figure out what they had done to keep it and us intact."

Spock nodded. "The Kelvans did not survive long enough for any of the Federation scientists to learn from them." He fell silent for a moment. "It was a race that had much to offer had they survived."

"That doesn't exactly help us here," Kirk said.

"No," Spock agreed.

"I want you to find out exactly where we are," Kirk said as the doors opened onto the bridge. "I want to know what, if any, options we have."

Scotty was just leaving the command chair when Kirk and Spock stepped out onto the bridge. "Ach, Captain, I was just about to come to sickbay."

"Report, Mr. Scott?"

"Not good, sir," Scotty said, shaking his head. "The ship is undamaged, as far as anyone can tell, but nothing up here seems to be working. Sensors are on the blink, communications don't work and it's like a black void out there, canna get a bearing on anything.... "

Kirk glanced over at Spock, who raised an eyebrow, then he looked back at the Engineer. "Thank you, Mr. Scott. Would you run a complete check on the engines? We may have to press them a bit, and I'd like to be sure they are up to it."

Scotty looked at Kirk with a puzzled expression, but his answer was quick. "Aye, sir. I'll make sure my bairns are up to anything you might ask of them." He disappeared into the turbolift.

Kirk eased himself into the command chair. His body ached with fatigue along with the sundry other injuries that combined to make him feel really wretched, although he was not about to admit it to anyone, least of all himself.

"Captain.... " It was Uhura's voice from over his shoulder. He turned to look at her with an inquiring expression. "I have gone over communications, sir, and there is absolutely nothing wrong. There's just nothing there to reach out and contact, sir. It doesn't make sense."

"Thank you, Uhura," Kirk said. He rubbed a hand over his aching forehead, then looked at the helm. "Same thing, Mr. Chekov?"

"Yes, sir. No instrument readings whatsoever."

Kirk got to his feet and walked forward to look over Sulu's shoulder. "Have they been this way since we entered the barrier?" he asked. "Was there any time when they cleared?"

Sulu looked down at his instruments, then back at Kirk with a sheepish expression. "I honestly can't remember, Captain. My attention was, uh, well, elsewhere."

Kirk put a hand on the helmsman's shoulder in an understanding gesture. As McCoy had said, there were some very embarrassed people on this ship, and berating them would not help the situation. "Never mind, Mr. Sulu. It doesn't really matter."

"Captain.... " Spock's voice came from the science station. "A moment?"

Kirk walked over to where Spock was punching out various readings. "You were right, sir," Spock said softly, pointing out different screens. "This shows the computer readout from the ship's log the very first time we came in contact with the outer barrier, the time that Lt. Commander Mitchell and others were affected.... "

"Go on," Kirk said, not wanting to remember, not wanting to hear that a similar incident might strike again.

Spock pointed to another screen. "This is the reading when the Kelvans took the Enterprise through.... "

Kirk's finger traced the pattern. "It is subtly different," he noted.

Spock nodded. "It is different because of the speed of the ship. If you remember, our first encounter with the barrier was at warp one, and our second.... "

"At a speed that even this newer ship is incapable of going," Kirk said softly. "Perhaps if we had transwarp drive.... "

"Perhaps," Spock said dubiously. He leaned back and looked up at Kirk. "However, that is a moot point. What is clear is that your hunch appears to be correct. The composition of the barrier is made up of the same radiation, but at a much higher intensity. We are obviously still in the energy barrier with no clear idea of where we entered, or which way we should go to get out."

Kirk stared at the Vulcan for a moment. "Which way? I never thought of that. You mean there is a good bet that we might come out on the wrong side?"

Spock steepled his fingers but could not hide the glint of humor in his eyes. "I am not a betting man, Captain. However, I would estimate the odds to be fifty-fifty, I believe is how you would put it."

"Which means we're just as likely to go the wrong way as the right," Kirk stated the obvious, crossing his arms gingerly across his chest.

The movement was not lost on Spock, but he thought it best not to comment. "It is the best I can offer at the moment," he replied.

Kirk caught the wording. "At the moment," he repeated. "And with a little more time?"

"Unknown, Captain, but there are some theories I could try."

"Good," Kirk said. "You've got that time." He turned and looked at the screen which showed the Klingon bird of prey with the blue planet in the background. "Put someone on a detailed mapping of that planet... oh," he corrected himself, "no sensors." He stood staring at the Klingon ship. "I don't like the idea that they're out there and I don't know what they're doing." He turned to Uhura. "You're not busy at the moment, Commander?" he started.

"No, sir," she replied, a puzzled look on her face.

"Then I want you to organize a reception for our friends over there," Kirk said. "They have been out to kill me, but since things backfired and they managed to save my life, I think we should do something to thank them." He smiled at Uhura's expression. "Contact Security. I don't know how many details we have, but I want every Klingon shadowed, and I don't want our guests in areas of this ship where they don't belong."

"Meaning they're not allowed out of the forward observation lounge," Uhura added with a grin.

"Have I ever told you how observant you are?" Kirk asked with an answering smile.

"No, but it's nice to hear," Uhura said as she got to her feet. "I'll get to it right away, sir. Since we have other diplomats on board, I believe protocol states I should ask for their help in planning this."

"Good idea," Kirk said. "Where are our guests, anyway?"

"Security has them somewhere safe," Uhura replied. "After Sybok was killed, whatever spell he had over all of us faded, and we found ourselves standing on the bridge with a bunch of strangers, so I called in Security."

"You did?" Kirk asked.

Uhura looked as sheepish as Sulu had been. "It seemed the least I could do under the circumstances," she offered.

Kirk smiled at her reassuringly, then turned away to look at the viewscreen again, wincing as pain stabbed through his chest. He took a couple of shallow breaths, waiting for it to subside, and said, without turning around, "Then I'll leave it up to you to extend the invitation to our friends out there, Uhura, and perhaps some excuse as to why we are making no attempt to depart from our present location.... "

"I believe the mapping would be a logical reason," Spock ventured as he turned from the science station. "They do not need to know our scanners are inoperative, and I should think the Klingons would be just as interested."

"Do you? I wonder," Kirk mused. "They have never struck me as a race that had much curiosity. They seem to let other people do all the work, then they come along and take what they want." He glanced over at the Vulcan. "Keep on with your work, Spock. I'm heading for sickbay for a few minutes."

Spock shot a concerned look at Kirk, but made no comment. The Captain smiled reassuringly at him, as he entered the turbolift. Kirk was not heading for sickbay for the reason Spock feared, but he **did** want to talk to McCoy.



McCoy had just poured himself a small glass of brandy and was putting the bottle away when Kirk walked in. He looked a little surprised and rose swiftly to his feet. "Trouble, Captain?" he asked.

"You tell me," Kirk said.

McCoy's eyebrows rose. "I'm not following you."

Kirk gestured to the glass on McCoy's desk. "That -- and the reason for it."

McCoy looked at the brandy for a minute, then back up at Kirk. "Since when did my taking a drink signify trouble?"

"Since Sybok did a number on all of us, or tried to." Kirk leaned against the edge of the doorway. "He pulled things out of us we'd never talked about -- we learned things about each other that we never suspected were there."

"Didn't learn much about you," McCoy countered. "You're too pig-headed to admit weakness."

Kirk shook his head. "I admit weakness. Hell, I've done it often enough, but I wasn't going to do it in front of him. There's no way he was going to go into my head and pull out something to cripple me in front of him."

"Do you think that's what he's done, Jim, cripple me?"

"Did he?"

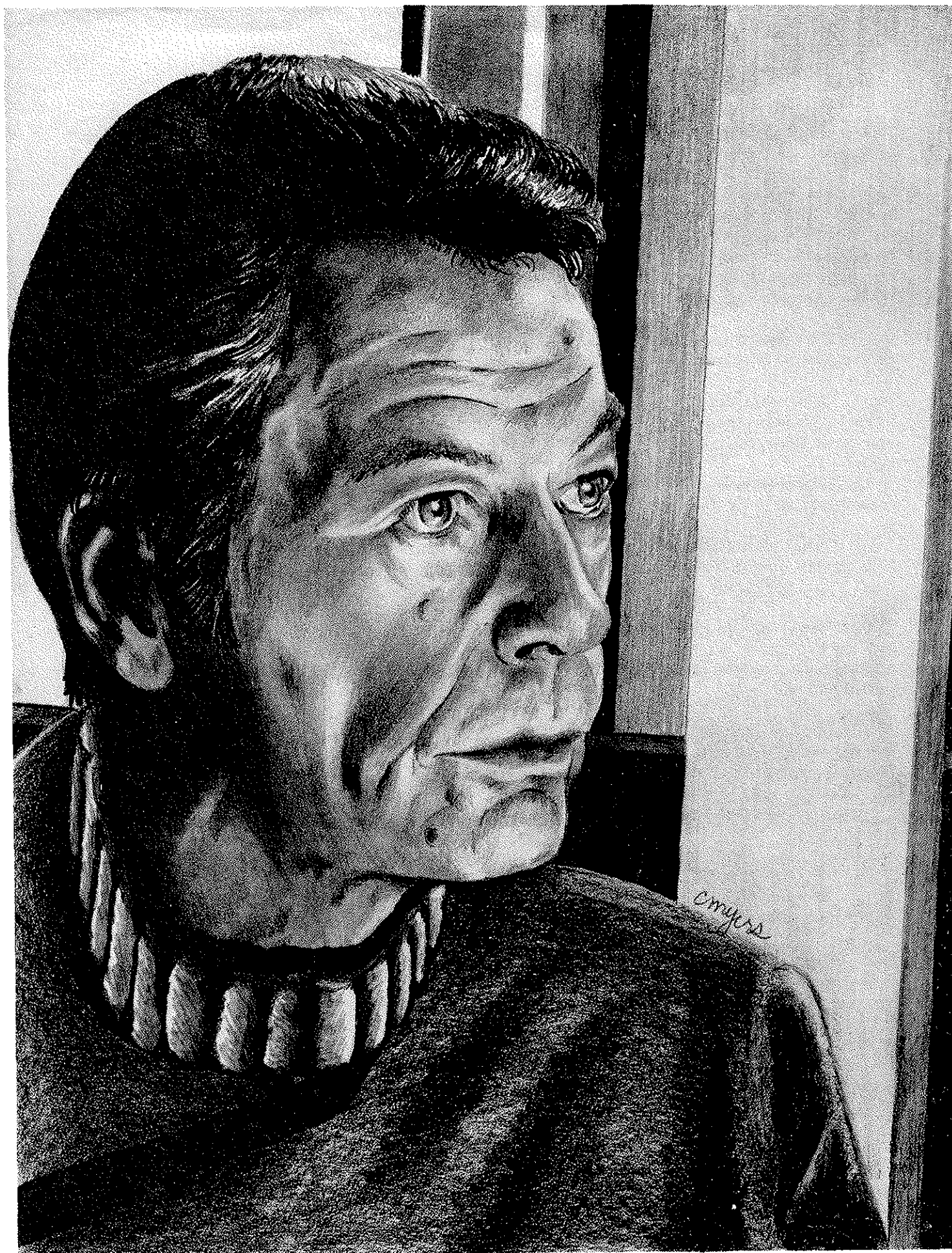
McCoy sat down in his chair again, a half-bemused expression on his face. "Sybok was a master at controlling men, I suppose most zealots are." He looked up at Kirk. "He didn't show me anything about myself that I didn't already know. Sure he brought up old pain -- probably the worst pain I'd ever experienced in my life. You know what the sanctity of life means to me. That man whose life I took was my own father, Jim -- the person who planted the seed of what I was to become." He smiled slightly. "I worshipped my father," he said softly. "Even when I became a man and discovered that he had faults and flaws like other men, he still remained a giant in my eyes." McCoy paused for a moment, looking past Kirk at some distant memory, then he cleared his throat and went on. "My father was not famous. His name does not live on in recorded history. He was just a man in a world of men, no better and no worse than average. But he was more than that to me, Jim, and it was because he was more than that, that I did what I did. My dad was a doctor. He knew how long he could exist with the pain and suffering that disease would cause. He knew his own level of tolerance and, more importantly, he knew my limits while helplessly watching him die, inch by inch, over the course of time. So he wanted to end it, before either of us lost control." He took a deep breath, then got up and walked over to where Kirk was standing. "Sybok did nothing to heal that pain, Jim, I was wrong about that. All he did was point out the same conclusion I had come to years ago, only I suppose I only half believed it all this time. My father knew... "

"Sybok made you go further than that," Kirk reminded him in a quiet voice.

McCoy's eyes darkened. "The cure, you mean."

Kirk nodded, but said nothing.

McCoy was silent for a long time, then he took a very deep breath. "Hindsight is so easy. Looking at it from the standpoint then, yes, maybe I did the wrong thing.... "



"So there are still doubts," Kirk ventured.

McCoy glanced over at Kirk. "Doubts?" He shook his head. "No, no doubts. There is only a certain amount of pain a man's body can undergo, Jim, before it starts to give out. Even if we had kept Dad alive on full life support, that damage would have been there. Oh, maybe there was a small chance that he would have emerged a whole being, but I doubt it." He looked away, and Kirk could see his friend's eyes were full of tears. "I know now that my father might have lived, but neither of us knew it then and we both did what was right for him." He looked over at Kirk again. "No matter what Sybok said, in my heart I know I did the right thing for Dad. Sure it was painful confronting it again, living that agony over again -- his and mine -- but it doesn't alter what happened, or the reasons for which I did it."

Kirk hesitated, then reached out and put a hand on McCoy's arm. "I had no right to pry," he said softly.

"Sure you did," McCoy answered with a weak grin. "You're the captain, and you have to be sure that all the personnel under your command are fit for duty. In a word, you don't trust us."

Kirk found himself smiling back, although a bit ruefully. "You see things a bit too clearly sometimes, Bones."

"That's why I don't have to ask you what your deep dark secret is," McCoy said. "I'm pretty sure I already know. You might be able to stand up against Sybok, but you don't stand a chance against your friendly country doctor."

"What about the others?" Kirk asked, deliberately changing the subject. Maybe McCoy did know, but Kirk also knew it was something he did not want to talk about -- not then and maybe not ever. "What did Sybok do to them, and how will it affect their performance?"

McCoy looked at Kirk sharply, the teasing remark he had been about to make fleeing from his mind, warned by the tone of Kirk's voice that something was very wrong. "What performance? What are you holding back, Captain?"

Kirk hesitated, then shrugged his shoulders slightly. "Don't know why I'm keeping it such a big secret." He looked at McCoy's brandy glass. "Can I have some of that stuff?"

"Nope," McCoy answered. "You're on pretty potent medication. It wouldn't mix with alcohol very well. How about some coffee?"

"Sounds like a poor substitute, but if it's all I can get..." Kirk said, wrinkling his nose.

"I'll program some up while you tell me what's so all-fired important that everybody has to be on his toes."

"We're lost," Kirk said bluntly.

McCoy looked up from the processor. "We're what?"

Kirk sat down and stretched out his legs. "Sybok got us into the energy barrier that surrounds the center of the galaxy, and I think we're still there. If so, we don't know which way is home and which way is oblivion."

McCoy put a cup of steaming coffee down in front of Kirk. "From what I know about these barriers, things could get a little messy."

"Tell me about it," Kirk answered, taking a sip of his coffee. "Um, this is good," he added with an appreciative look over the rim of the mug.

"Glad you like it," McCoy said. "When did you eat last?"

"Not important at the moment," Kirk said bluntly. "To answer your first observation, things could indeed get messy." He put the mug down. "While we're figuring out what to do, I'd like you to run through the medical records and pull out all files of crewmembers who show any latent psionic abilities."

"I gather this is not a request," McCoy said.

Kirk shook his head. "Sorry, but it could be very important." He picked up the mug and took another sip of coffee. "Once you've done that, I want you to make up a list for Security.... "

"Security?"

Kirk looked at him with a grim expression on his face. "If we do find our way through the barrier, I want any crewmembers possessing what you feel is a high ESP rating to be confined to maximum security locations."

"You're not kidding on this, are you?" McCoy said.

"If you doubt what I'm saying, Doctor, I suggest you reread the log concerning the Enterprise's mission stardate 1312.4."

"Gary Mitchell?"

Kirk nodded. "Gary Mitchell."

"I'll get right on it, Captain." McCoy finished the last of his brandy, then looked at Kirk who was just getting up. "Perhaps it won't happen again," he offered. "Maybe this barrier's different."

Kirk looked at him. "The captain of the Valiant didn't know what had happened until it was too late. The young captain who followed him through that barrier made the mistake of not reading the Valiant's log until it was almost too late. I don't intend to make that same mistake twice." He turned and started out the door. "Oh, I almost forgot. We're going to have a little reception for our guests and our Klingon friends out there. Uhura is fixing it up. Thought I might cause a little diversion from our present problems."

"You're inviting Klingons onto this ship?" McCoy asked in disbelief.

"Something wrong with that?" Kirk asked innocently.

"Well, no, but.... well, it's just that you haven't gotten along with them so well in the past."

"Nor do I expect to now, Doctor, but we're all in this together, so we might as well

Well, this is a new one, McCoy mused. Doesn't say much for the situation if you're willing to join up with people who would far rather see you dead than to shake your hand. There's no way I'm going to miss this little shingdig. I want to see you come face to face with the man who wanted to kill you and see how you handle it. You say you're no diplomat, but it's going to take one to pull this little party off!



Kirk met Spock coming out of the turbolift. "Problem?" he asked as he fell in alongside the Vulcan.

"Negative. I was on my way to science station 3 to further my investigations. It is somewhat hard to concentrate on the bridge and these calculations must be precise."

"Are you sure it's only that?" Kirk asked softly.

Spock stopped and looked at him. "I do not think I am following your line of thought, Captain."

Kirk returned his look steadily. "Are you sure?" he asked.

Spock nodded. "You are hedging about something, and as you know, Vulcans see things in black and white, not shades of grey."

"Okay, you want it plain? Sybok."

"Yes?" Spock answered noncommittally.

You sure aren't going to make this easy, are you? Kirk thought. "I just had a talk with Bones... about... about what Sybok did to him back in the observation lounge.... " Kirk took a deep breath. "I guess I'm asking you the same thing.... " Damn! he thought. Spock saw his brother die in front of his eyes, and here I am practically condemning the man.

Spock continued to look at Kirk and for an instant Kirk thought he would turn and walk away without speaking, but he did not. Finally he shook his head slightly. "After all we have been through together, Captain, I would have thought you knew me better."

Kirk flushed. "I guess my own frailty comes out at awkward times."

Spock continued to regard him. "That is not something you were willing to admit to Sybok."

"Not to him, no," Kirk answered, "and very rarely to myself. I'm sorry, Spock. I know what happened back there was very painful, and I have no right to bring it up."

"You have the right, Captain.... " Spock started.

"You mean as captain I have the right to go poking my nose into my crew's affairs," Kirk interrupted, thinking of what McCoy had said.

"No. I was going to say you have earned that right -- as a friend." Spock smiled slightly at Kirk's expression. "Sybok did not know me. He knew a small boy who was desperate to be something he could never be, and he was willing to use that desperation to bind me to him. As I grew up, I saw Sybok for what he was, yet that draw was still there, even after I realized I could never follow him. Then, when we met again on Nimbus Three, I discovered the draw was gone. He was a familiar stranger who I once knew, but knew no longer."

"He was still your brother," Kirk said softly.

"Yes," Spock replied in an equally quiet voice. "In spite of everything, he was still my brother... "

"Captain Kirk to the bridge.... " A voice interrupted them, causing Kirk to frown. He and Spock were finally starting to tread on needed ground, and now this. He walked over to the wall communicator. "Kirk here."

"A communique from the Klingon ship, Captain, which needs your immediate attention."

"On my way," Kirk answered, then closed the channel. He looked over at Spock. "I guess it's strike two on my attempt at amateur psychology," he said with a rueful grin.

"Perhaps we should allow the good Doctor to keep that role, and we should remain in known territory," Spock offered.

A neat way to say stay out of your business, Kirk thought. "I think you're right," Kirk added with an embarrassed grin. "Consider the subject closed. Let me know when you find out anything about the energy barrier."

"Rest assured that I shall, Captain."

Kirk nodded. "Later then. I'll see you at the reception." He turned and headed for the bridge.



Spock stopped just inside the door of science station 3 and drew in a long, shuddering breath. He had been truthful when he told Kirk that he was finding it difficult to work on the bridge, but not the reason. Every time he turned around, he saw Sybok -- saw the image of where he had been standing, and it was bringing back memories that Spock was finding difficult to deal with.

When T'Lar had performed the refusion back on Vulcan, she had returned his memory intact, but not the emotions. Ever since, Spock was finding out how much pain there had been in his life. To see an image in his mind was one thing, but to suddenly

feel the stabbing emotion that went with that memory was proving at times more than he could cope with.

Sybok was one. And not Sybok so much as having to deal with the death of a blood relative. Death was a logical progression of life, even when it was unexpected. Yet Sybok was the first that affected him. There had been no death in his family save T'Pol, and he had not found it in his heart to grieve for the one who, in life, had caused him the agony he still carried secretly in his heart. She had caused Kirk's death -- she had allowed Spock to be the instrument of that death, and for that Spock would never forgive her.

He walked across to the work station which was surrounded by computer screens and sat down. He did not look at the material he had transferred from the bridge. He was remembering another time and place -- a young Human leaning against a wall on Deneva grieving for a brother lying dead on the floor, and he had said he understood. But he had not. Not until now that he himself had seen a brother give up his life to save the ones he thought he led -- not until he had seen his own brother die.

And, in the silence of that room, Spock put his head down and grieved. Not for Sybok, not for himself, but for that young Human and the life they had shared.



Uhura leaned back against the transporter room wall and let out a huge sigh of relief. She had scoured the ship once she ran out of security details, and had managed to match each Klingon who transported to the ship with at least one member of Starfleet, the explanation being they were honored guests and were being accorded all the rights and privileges that any guest on the Enterprise was given.

The last person to beam over was the Klingon First Officer. Uhura took one look at her and assigned both Sulu and Chekov to escort her to the forward observation lounge. I sure wouldn't want to meet her in a dark alley, Uhura thought as she watched the three of them disappear through the door and out into the corridor. I only hope I haven't given those two more than they can handle! She stepped away from the transporter console and headed for her quarters. She had time for a quick sprucing up before going to the reception.

Kirk stood just inside the door to the observation lounge, politely greeting each guest as they walked in, and making sure that wherever there was a Klingon, there was at least one crewmember shadowing him. He found that they had little to say to each other as each Klingon entered, save General Koord, and even his remarks had been brief. Klaa had walked by him with no acknowledgment, his head held high. Kirk smiled grimly as he turned away. At least one of them had the courage of his convictions. Klaa obviously disliked Kirk as much as Kirk did him, and the thin veneer of civility was not about to deter him. So be it, Kirk thought. I appreciate honesty, even in a situation like this.

Kirk had been wandering around the room for a few minutes making small talk when he noticed Spock and McCoy walk in together. One look at the Vulcan's expression alerted Kirk that something was wrong. He started to give his apologies to the person he had been talking to, then hesitated. A Klingon officer walked past him -- a woman who would stand out in any crowd as someone to be reckoned with. He watched with amusement at the sight of Sulu and Chekov tagging along behind her, and at their sudden change of direction as the woman stopped and turned to stand at attention by her captain's side. First officer, I'd bet, Kirk thought. She looks like she'd fight by his side

against all odds. He glanced over at Spock, who was talking to a security guard. I remember times when Spock has stood beside me like that -- a silent guard against all comers. I guess that's what makes a commanding officer's life a bit easier, when you have that kind of security.

A young officer stopped by his side, a tray of drinks in his hand. "Pulling double duty, Lieutenant?" Kirk asked with a smile.

"I think I'm up to triple duty, sir," the young man answered with a grin. He glanced over at the two Klingons now standing side by side. "I wouldn't like to tangle with those two without help," he added softly.

Kirk grunted a noncommittal reply as another crewmember walked towards the Klingons to offer them refreshments. Klaa brushed him aside with a wave of his hand, his eyes locked on Kirk. The young lieutenant looked from the Klingon back to his captain, sensing there was something more going on here than met the eye.

Klaa stood tall, and in one swift movement pressed his clenched fist to his chest, then brought it forward in a salute. Acknowledgment or challenge? Kirk found himself wondering.

The Lieutenant was not the only one who noticed the Klingon's action. "Trouble, Spock," McCoy said under his breath. Spock turned around to see Kirk halfheartedly hit his hand against his chest, but there was no mistaking the meaning in the clear hazel eyes as Kirk turned away from Klaa. "Perhaps," Spock answered McCoy. "That is for the Captain to decide."

McCoy stared at the Vulcan. "That's an odd statement coming from you, Spock," he said.

The Vulcan looked out at the misty-blue planet that was still visible, filling the viewscreen. "Put it down to a philosophical mood, Doctor. What is to be, will be. Perhaps things were destined to happen long before we were born, as some people believe."

McCoy continued to stare at Spock, his surprise growing. "Becoming religious on me, Spock?" he asked finally.

Spock glanced over at McCoy for a moment. "The Vulcans have always respected the many religious views found throughout the galaxy, Doctor. Let us just leave it as learning to connect with one's feelings."

This last comment left McCoy speechless. He turned his attention back to Kirk who was just starting to move away from the Klingon Captain. Klaa was still standing tall, his eyes boring into the human's back as Kirk started towards his friends. "I have the feeling we may need the deity's help before all of this is over," McCoy muttered to himself. He glanced out at the misty clouds that surrounded the planet. "I wonder what it really was that we met out there. It surely wasn't God.... "

Kirk came to a stop in front of them, his gaze questioning. Was he again delving into something he should steer clear of? He looked at Spock, then over to McCoy, both of whom were looking awfully serious. "Cosmic thoughts, gentlemen?" he asked with a slight smile, giving them a chance to brush him off if they wanted to.

Spock remained silent, not returning Kirk's look. "We were speculating," McCoy said, deciding that most of their conversation was best left unreported. "Is God really out there?" He looked beyond Kirk to the planet where they had risked so much.

Kirk glanced over his shoulder, thinking about what McCoy had just said. Like his friends, he knew they had not met God, although he was loathe to say what they had met. He turned his attention back to the others. "Maybe he's not out there, Bones." He hesitated for a moment, but it seemed the right time to open up a little, to let some of his own emotions loose. "Maybe he's right here..." he said, lightly touching his chest, "... in the heart."

McCoy smiled slightly. It was rare for Kirk to talk like this — about abstract ideas that had little to do with life and duty.

Spock had yet to join in the conversation, and eventually he drew in a deep breath. Kirk's attention went to him instantly, noting the same drawn look that had been there earlier when the Vulcan had arrived at the reception with McCoy. Something was obviously bothering Spock. He might as well try to draw it out. It seemed for all of them to be a moment for reflecting. "Spock?"

Spock glanced at him for a moment, then looked away. You are too perceptive, he thought. You know something is wrong, but how can I tell you what it is? How can I tell you that I now understand what that young commander went through so many years ago, that I now understand the pain, so different from any I have experienced before. Spock knew that only time would rid him of the hurt of this moment, the same way Kirk had been healed. No amount of logic would help. Sybok had gone to his death not knowing his brother, nor the world he had made for himself. Spock found he was grieving for that as much as for the brother he had lost. He was aware of Kirk's questioning look, and knew that he would have to give some sort of answer. He finally looked at Kirk. "I was thinking of Sybok," he said quietly. He looked away again, unable to meet the sympathetic eyes of his friend. "I've lost a brother."

Spock heard Kirk's understanding reply. "Yes," he said quietly, his eyes momentarily focusing on a distant point. "I lost a brother once."

McCoy looked at Kirk, also remembering that day on Deneva when he had to tell his young captain that Sam Kirk was dead. At least Jim could understand what Spock was going through, maybe help him a little.

Kirk's eyes came back onto focus. Spock had not seen the faraway look. He was still looking down, still berating himself for showing emotion over something that logically should be so easy to accept. Kirk looked back at Spock. "I was lucky," he continued in a voice that suddenly cracked with emotion. "I got him back."

For an instant no one moved, then Spock's eyes finally met his friend's. You were not thinking of your own brother, he thought in astonishment. You are talking about me... Kirk's smile caused Spock's heart to skip a beat.

McCoy's voice broke into Spock's thoughts and took Kirk's attention away from the Vulcan so he did not see the slight green flush that crossed Spock's face. "I thought you said men like us didn't have families," McCoy said, a slight smile crossing his face.

Kirk suddenly remembered their conversation around the campfire back in Yosemite — that conversation which seemed to have taken place years — not days —

before. He held McCoy's eyes steadily. "I was wrong," he said simply. I have probably never been so wrong about anything in my whole life, he thought. But so much had happened and I was feeling my mortality, forgetting what friendship is all about. David is dead, the Enterprise was destroyed, everything that I touched seemed to die -- Spock was the least of it after a while. I guess you were right back there, Bones. I was courting death, although I didn't realize it at the time. No, we're family, the three of us, and I guess we're destined to remain this way whether we want to or not.

McCoy glanced over at Spock to see the Vulcan's gaze on him and answered with a slight smile, then Kirk's voice regained his attention.

"Looks like everyone here is having a good time," Kirk said, then he glanced at Spock. "We've done our part here. We'd better get back to formulating a plan for getting out of the barrier. We're going to have to discuss it with the Klingons at some point, and I'd like to know exactly what our options are. And, another thing. I want to find out how they discovered where we were. If their instruments work in this muck, I want to know about it."

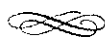
"I would suggest that we invite General Koord to join us in that case," Spock suggested. "He respects us in a way I believe Captain Klaa does not."

"Agreed," Kirk said. "You go invite him and I'll meet you in briefing room 6, I need to talk to Uhura for a minute." He looked at McCoy. "Bones, you stay here and entertain the troops for a while."

"Sure," McCoy said. "I guess it's better to keep an eye on those that you suspect might cause some of the casualties than to have to go around picking them up afterwards."

"Thanks," Kirk replied. "I'll get back as soon as I can."

McCoy watched Kirk as he made his way through the crowded room, and the Doctor noticed that the Klingon Klaa did the same. What is it about you that always draws attention? McCoy wondered. There is not one person in this room who is unaware of your presence, be he your friend or enemy. I wonder what it must be like to go through life with people hanging on your every word and movement. McCoy shook his head. You are so used to it, Jim-boy, that you probably aren't even aware of it anymore, if you ever were. His attention was taken by St. John Talbot arriving with Caithlin Dar. McCoy had been admiring her from afar and had been looking forward to meeting her. Kirk was momentarily forgotten.



Kirk breathed a sigh of relief as he escaped from the forward observation lounge. He had always disliked diplomatic functions, and having to hold this one solely to keep his eyes on the enemy was more pressure than he wanted to deal with at the moment. He leaned back against the wall, involuntarily acknowledging the pain that was starting to stab through his chest -- pain he had successfully pushed to the back of his mind around the Klingons, but which was now throbbing relentlessly. The door beside him swished open and Spock and General Koord came through. Kirk pushed himself away from the wall quickly enough so Koord noticed nothing, but his action did not escape Spock's discerning eye. Kirk shook his head slightly in answer to a slightly cocked eyebrow, but Spock knew there was something wrong. However, now was not the time to pursue the subject.

"General Koord has agreed to cooperate with us, Captain," Spock said quietly.

Kirk nodded. "I appreciate any help you can give, General," he said, wondering yet again how a strong warrior such as Koord had been could have fallen under the spell of a man like Sybok.

Koord bowed his head slightly, then took a deep breath. "As I have already explained to your First Officer, I very much doubt whether I can be of much assistance, Captain. Navigation is something I never had any reason to study, unlike weapons systems." He glanced over at the Vulcan, then back at Kirk. "I believe you should take First Officer Vixis into your confidence."

Kirk stared at Koord for a moment, then turned away. "Perhaps we should continue this conversation in a more private place," he said. The three walked in silence to briefing room 6. Kirk waited until the door had shut behind them, then turned to Koord. "Why Vixis and not Klaa?"

Koord appeared uncomfortable. "He has sworn to kill you, Captain, and will do so if he possibly can."

Kirk's gaze did not waiver. "He told me back on the bird of prey that his attack was not sanctioned by your government."

Koord met Kirk's eyes steadily. "That is true, but I believe true only because Klaa did not bother to inform the Empire of his intentions." He hesitated for a moment. "You are a much hated figure among our people, Kirk. Those of us who are warriors admire you, even though you are the enemy. Those who lead us have sworn your death." He shrugged. "That is why Klaa acts as he does. That is why he will kill you."

Spock stiffened at Koord's words and he unconsciously moved a step closer to Kirk's side, a movement that was not lost on Kirk or the Klingon. Kirk glanced at Spock for a moment, thinking of Vixis beside her own captain, then his attention went back to Koord. "Will?" he echoed.

"Unless he is prevented, yes," Koord said, "and his people will follow him. Do not trust any of them, Captain, if you wish to remain alive." He smiled slightly. "However, I have observed the precautions you have already taken back at the reception. I am possibly warning the wrong man."

Kirk acknowledged the attempt at humor with a slight smile, then he sobered. "You said to trust none of them, yet deal with Vixis. Why?"

Koord shrugged. "She is the navigator and at the moment more valuable than the commanding officer in your plans. Besides, she is ambitious and may feel there is something to be gained by her cooperation should Klaa fail in his efforts to kill you." He glanced at Spock for a moment, who was still standing close by Kirk's side. "Much is said about the loyalty of the men who surround James T. Kirk. Do not make the mistake that your kind of loyalty is to be found among my people, Captain. It does not exist."

Kirk was silent for a long time. "Well," he said at last, "I guess we don't need loyalty here, but we are going to need cooperation."

"Believe that we wish to return home as much as you do, Captain," Koord said quietly. "In this you will receive cooperation."

Kirk glanced up at Koord. "You know of our problem?"

The Klingon shook his head. "Not in detail, no. But we have lost enough ships at the outer barrier to understand to some degree the difficulty we are no doubt now facing -- strictly from an observer's perspective," he added quickly. "I've never been through any barrier before."

"And you haven't yet," Kirk said. "We're in it, with no clear understanding of how to get out."

"Shall I go and ask Vixis to join us?" Spock asked.

"Not just yet, Spock," Kirk said. "I'd like to talk to the head of security first, and I'm not even sure who it is at the moment."

"I will ask Lt. Noren to come immediately," Spock said.

Kirk nodded his thanks. "Tell McCoy I'll meet him in sickbay in about twenty minutes. In the meantime, make sure that our guests remain with their escorts at all times, although I think Sulu and Chekov might need a little extra help," he added with a smile. He looked back at Koord. "Then if we can count on your continued assistance, General, I will feel better about keeping most of the crew from the bird of prey on board my ship."

"You shall have that help, Captain," Koord said firmly. "I will endeavor to monitor Captain Klaa's movements myself."

"I would be grateful for that," Kirk said. He waited until the two men had walked out the door, fighting the pain in his chest until the door was fully shut, then he leaned against a nearby lab table trying hard not to double over from pain that was suddenly making breathing difficult. It was much worse now than it had been earlier, and Kirk knew he did not have time to give in to it. Not yet. He heard approaching footsteps and quickly straightened up, pulling his tunic carefully into place, trying hard to get his breathing back under control.

"You sent for me, sir?" A youthful voice sounded in his ears.

Kirk looked up to see a ridiculously young officer standing in front of him. "Yes, Lt. Noren," he said, grateful to discover that his voice betrayed none of the pain he was experiencing. "We are going to have the Klingons on the Enterprise for a while longer, and it is imperative that they be kept as much as possible in the forward observation lounge. Under no circumstance is one of them to be without escort at any time, even if that person has to go to the head, is that understood?"

"Understood, sir. I assume I am authorized to delegate anyone I can find to help out?"

"It's that bad, is it?" Kirk asked sympathetically.

Noren nodded. "There are only ten in my unit, sir, and I'm the most experienced." Kirk winced, and Noren smiled with understanding. "That's one reason why I need all the help I can dig up."

"Take whoever you need, Lieutenant," Kirk said. "Try not to let the Klingons congregate in a large group, or pass too many messages back and forth among themselves."

"I take it that someone is in danger, sir?" Noren asked, but there was no questioning tone in his voice.

"You could," Kirk answered dryly. "Dismissed, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir," Noren answered briskly, then he hesitated. "You can count on all of us, sir. We may be green, but we're determined." He snapped off a seldom seen salute, then disappeared out the door, leaving a rather bemused commanding officer staring after him.



Kirk arrived at sickbay before McCoy, and he sat down to wait. He leaned his head back against the wall, momentarily allowing the pain and fatigue to wash through him -- allowing himself a moment's weakness where it would do no harm.

He was unaware of McCoy's arrival. The Doctor stopped short as he entered sickbay, his eyes taking in the pale figure of his captain sitting framed in the doorway of McCoy's office. Rarely had he seen Kirk so obviously hurt and exhausted, allowing a vulnerability to show through that he always thought he kept well hidden.

Knowing how embarrassed Kirk would be if he were to be caught in such a pose, McCoy stepped back and allowed the doors to slide shut, then made his next entrance extremely noisy, so that by the time he arrived in his office, Kirk was standing up waiting for him.

"What's this all about, Jim?" he blustered. "Spock came whispering some nonsense into my ear just when I finally got that cute little Romulan away from Talbot!" As he complained he ran an appraising eye over Kirk.

"I've got to stay on my feet, Bones," Kirk said bluntly, "and I can't, not without your help."

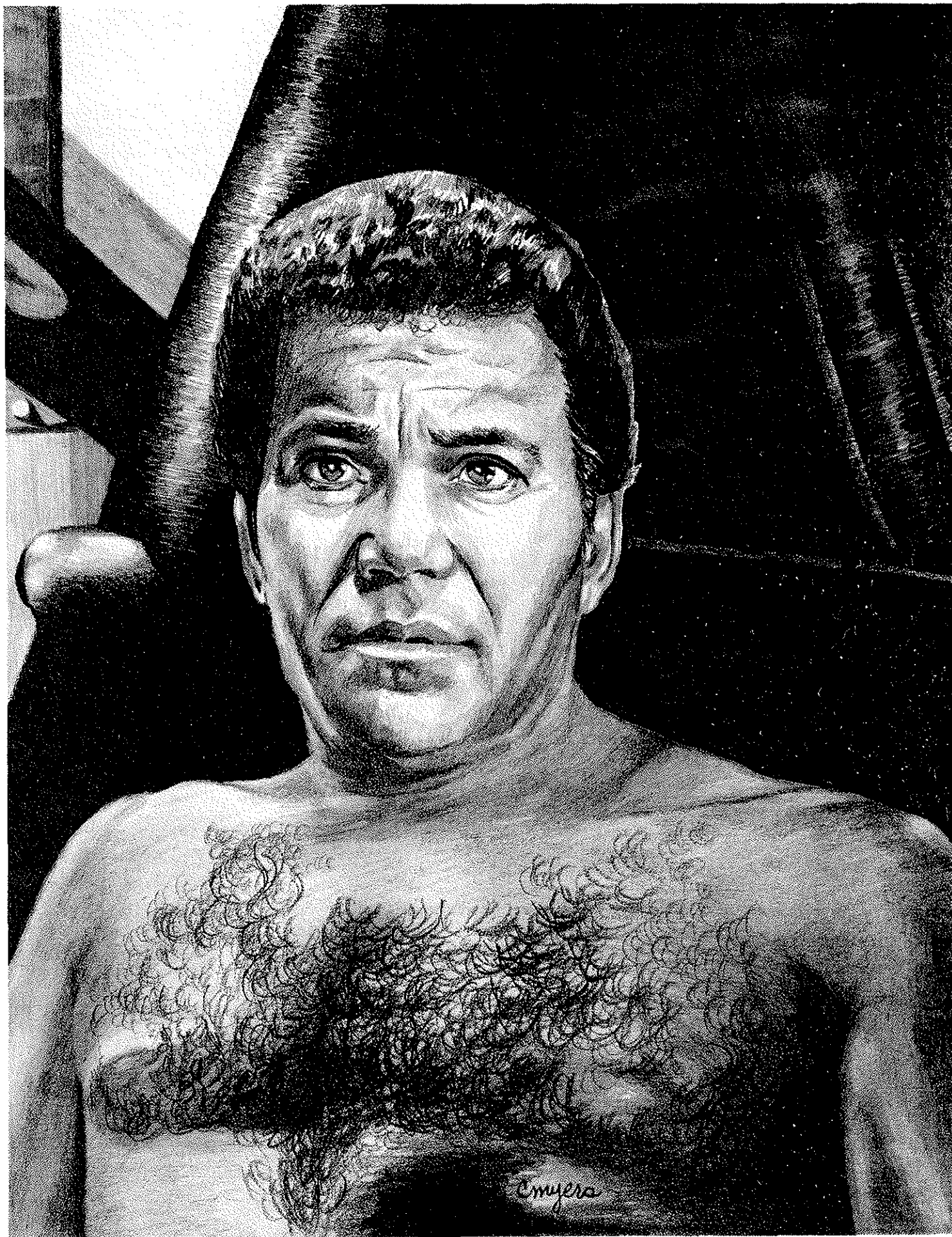
McCoy stared at him for a minute. "You know what I told you earlier," he said mildly, testing the waters to see how bad off Kirk really was.

"That I should be flat on my back, yes, I know," Kirk admitted. "I don't have time, Doctor. I've got a ship full of hostile Klingons, one of whom apparently has sworn to kill me, with the others willing to back him up, plus we still have to get out of here.... "

"Seems to me that we got to wherever it is we are now without much help from any of us," McCoy pointed out. "The ship probably wouldn't miss you very much if you didn't have your hand on the controls going back out."

"I'm the captain, Bones," Kirk said bluntly. "To the Klingons that means a lot. Where I am means a lot."

You're probably right, dammit, McCoy thought. "Okay," he said out loud. "Strip off your shirt and get on the table.... "



"What for? All I need is a pill or something," Kirk countered.

"I'm not a walking pharmaceutical company," McCoy shot back. "I need to know the severity of the injuries I'm going to be treating. I told you before that getting blasted by that... thing didn't do your insides any good, and I couldn't be responsible if you insisted on charging around. Well, sir, I need to reevaluate your condition. Shirt off!"

Kirk glared at him for a minute, then slowly took off his tunic, followed by the white command shirt. The burned skin on his chest stood out black and ugly, and was beginning to blister in spots. The damage caused by the energy beam that the alien had used against them was obviously still ongoing, and McCoy did not like the implications.

"That looks worse," McCoy commented as he picked up a scanner.

"It's sore enough," Kirk admitted as he put his clothing down on one of the beds.

"Turn around," McCoy ordered. As Kirk turned, McCoy whistled softly. The burn on Kirk's back was also more severe than it had been earlier. "Damn," McCoy swore. "That energy seems to have some sort of a mushrooming effect."

Kirk turned around and met McCoy's stare. "Meaning?"

McCoy took a deep breath. "Meaning that the entrance was small and the exit large. There seems to be some sort of energy still in your body that is expanding on an ever widening scale, and it's causing increasing damage." McCoy shook his head. "All we have to do is figure out some way of stopping it. Now, get on that table and let me see what we're dealing with."



"No contact at all?" Admiral Caflisch demanded as he walked into the situation room.

"None, sir. The Enterprise's last message was that they had arrived at Nimbus Three and were establishing orbit. That was, uh, almost 24 hours ago."

Caflisch frowned. "Jim wouldn't maintain silence this long unless something has happened and he is unable to communicate." He looked over toward a different operator. "How many ships do we have in that quadrant?"

The man worked at his computer for a few minutes, then looked at Caflisch. "Four, sir. Two Constitution-class starships -- U.S.S. Republic and Hood... " He hesitated for a moment, then looked up at Caflisch. "The Excelsior is out there too, sir, on her maiden run.... "

Shit! Caflisch swore to himself. "Is Styles still in command?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

There was a moment's silence while the man worked the computer. "Yes, sir," he said finally. "He is also the senior officer in that quadrant."

This couldn't get much worse, Caflisch thought. "Anything else even remotely near them?" he asked as a last resort.

Again computer keys clicked, and again came a shake of the head. "No, sir, that's it."

Caflisch paced the room for a few minutes wrestling with a dozen different ideas, none of which were any good. Finally he turned to the communications officer. "Put in a call to Captain Styles. I'll take it in my office."



McCoy worked quickly. The readings over Kirk's head indicated the pain and the continuing seepage from the various organs that had been damaged by the power of the weapon the alien had used against them in its anger. Kirk lay quietly, his face pale. He knew McCoy understood the necessity of Kirk staying on his feet and useless questions would do no good.

The small instrument McCoy held glowed and hummed as it slowly swept over Kirk's chest, repairing as best it could the small lesions that were continuing to appear beside the ones McCoy had repaired earlier -- lesions which were allowing blood to seep into cavities and thereby causing the pain and shortness of breath that Kirk was experiencing. Until he found some way of stopping the continuing damage, Kirk's life could be in real danger. He was only temporarily repairing injuries -- not curing them -- and those injuries might degenerate in such a way that further repair might not be possible. "I'm going to take some more tissue samples, Jim," he said, putting down the instrument he had been working with. "There's something going on here that I don't understand."

"What?" Kirk asked.

"If I knew, I'd tell you," McCoy said, irritation evident in his voice.

Kirk looked at him. "That serious, huh?" Kirk knew McCoy's reaction to something he did not understand was irritation, and the Doctor was clearly worried.

"It could be," McCoy shot back. "That energy is constantly causing new lesions. Unless I can find some way of stopping it, you could be in real trouble."

"What about Spock?" Kirk asked. "Is he being affected in the same way?"

"There's no way of knowing unless I examine him again, and I can guarantee you that he's not about to come to me. Some things have changed since the fal tor pan, but not the matter of his privacy."

Kirk lay silent while McCoy continued working, and the Doctor could see that his Captain's mind was far away. McCoy finally finished and stepped back. "Okay," he said brusquely, "you can sit up now, but stay there and give yourself a few minutes to let the healing at least start."

Kirk gingerly sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "It still hurts," he said, looking hopefully at McCoy.

"I'm sure it does, seeing as how I've just rearranged your entire insides to some degree, and that damned energy is trying to do the same." McCoy brought out a hypo. "I don't like to continue giving you this stuff, but you've stressed the importance of keeping you in command." He pressed the hypo against Kirk's shoulder. "This is going to make

you feel pretty good, so I want you to take it easy and not do more than you are capable of doing. Promise?"

Kirk rubbed his arm where the shot had pressed home. "I promise," he said absently, then he looked at McCoy. "Is this why I didn't hurt at the reception earlier?"

"Yup," McCoy replied, "and I want you to remember that. You're not cured, Captain, not by a long shot. Your heart is bruised, your lungs have a small fluid buildup, the muscles around your rib cage have torn fiber all through them, which makes breathing somewhat painful. In short, you are not fit to start the latest in a long line of Klingon wars."

"I don't intend to start a war, Bones, at least not if I can help it. Klaa will have to make the first move."

"I somehow don't see you stepping back from that challenge," McCoy said seriously, "and I'm not kidding when I say you're not up to it."

Kirk met McCoy's somber expression with one of his own. "I may have no choice, Doctor. The Klingons recognize only strength and weakness. If I show any of the latter, we could all be dead."

"Yeah, well, just be careful, okay? For my sake if for no other reason."

"I'll try," Kirk answered with a reassuring smile. He reached for his clothes. "Can I get dressed now? Spock's had enough time to finish his calculations, and I have to get together with Vixis."

"Who is Vixis?"

"Spock's other half," Kirk answered with a grin. He grabbed his tunic. "Thanks for everything, Bones. I really do feel a lot better." With that, Kirk disappeared out the door.

"Better living through chemistry," McCoy muttered under his breath. "This is not the way I like to practice medicine, Jim-boy. I only hope that I can figure out how to stop this damned reaction to the energy damage, and what I've already done does not backfire!" He looked at the door. "Who the hell is Vixis, and what do you mean Spock's other half?"



General Keb, the commander of the Klingon fleet, sat staring at the small planet that filled his viewscreen. "Nimbus Three," he mused. "It looks like something our Empire would claim as their own -- another barren desert. Bahl!" He turned away from the viewscreen. "Have you picked up the Enterprise's trail yet?"

"I think so, sir, there is a trail of atoms bearing 45 mark 9. It could only have been made by a starship -- it is too large for any wandering merchant ship to make."

"Good. Send a signal out to the others to follow that course, and to keep in formation. I do not want anyone making forays on their own."

"Acknowledged, sir."



"Admiral Caflisch, this is indeed a surprise," Captain Styles said smoothly, as was his way with everything he did, which was one reason why Caflisch disliked him so much.

I'm not surprised, Caflisch thought to himself, knowing he rarely contacted Styles about anything. Then he chided himself for being childish. Styles was the only one at the moment who was in a position to help in what possibly could be a sticky situation, and the thought made him shudder again. Snap out of it, Bob, he thought angrily, you have to go through with this and try not to offend this... this person if you can help it.

"Uh, Admiral," Styles voice sounded again. "I assume that you do wish to talk to me, and not just sit there staring at the screen."

Shit, I managed to hurt his feelings without saying anything! Caflisch swore under his breath. "I'm sorry, Captain," he said out loud, taking a firm hold of his temper. "I was just going over in my own mind what I wanted to say so I don't leave anything out."

"You wish me to take the Excelsior on a mission?" Styles asked eagerly.

Hell, no, Caflisch thought, but I don't have any choice. I was right when I told Jim that I needed him. There are other ships, but there's only one James Kirk, dammit. "We have a problem, Captain," he said finally. "The Enterprise was sent on a mission to Nimbus Three, and we haven't heard from her since her arrival. I'd like you to look into it."

"Where is Nimbus Three?" Styles asked.

God help me! Caflisch prayed. "I'm sure your navigator can find it," Caflisch said through clenched teeth.

"You said the Enterprise," Styles continued. "Surely you are not going to take such an important ship as mine and waste it looking for... for that person.... "

"I am not interested in what you think of your orders," Caflisch broke in. "I simply want them obeyed, Captain. You are to go to Nimbus Three and find the Enterprise, or find out where she went and follow her. With your transwarp drive, you can evade the sensors of most ships. That's an advantage other starships do not have. I am sending backup, but they won't be able to keep up with your transwarp speed... " He hesitated for a moment, then went on, unable to hide the smirk in his voice. "Assuming, that is, that it's working?"

"It is," Styles said in a huff. "Very well, Admiral, we will go if you insist, but I still do not see why Starfleet cares.... "

"That is enough, Captain," Caflisch snapped, no longer attempting to hold onto his temper. "If you botch this mission, you will find yourself no longer holding the rank you now enjoy, and if I hear from Kirk that you interfered in any way with him, you'll be busted to ensign, is that clear?"

Styles blanched visibly at Caflisch's words. "Understood," he said weakly.

Caflisch noted that there was no 'sir' in Styles' response, but he did not make an issue of it. It was enough that Styles would at least have a Federation ship to Kirk's aid as quickly as it was possible to get one there -- Caflisch only hoped that Kirk would not need that 'help.' "Very good, Styles. I expect regular communications from you as to the situation as you find it."

"Very good, sir," Styles echoed, starting to get hold of himself.

"Just see that it's done," Caflisch said sharply, then cut communications before Styles could respond. God help the Fleet, Caflisch thought as he pressed his communicator again. "Commander, I want you to contact the Republic and the Hood immediately, and patch in a three-way communication with their captains."

"Aye, sir, right away."

At least Starfleet's got some competent people left, Caflisch thought as he stood up and stretched. I just pray that we haven't lost the best of the bunch.



"How's it going, Spock?" Kirk asked as he walked into the room.

Spock looked up at the sound of Kirk's voice, his eyes quickly assessing the Captain's condition. "It is an interesting problem, Captain," he said at last, reassured by Kirk's expression that he was in better shape than when he had last seen him in briefing room 6.

"How so?"

"When we first attained orbit around the planetary body, we had full sensor power, according to the computer log.... "

"And now?"

Spock shook his head. "As soon as the alien was destroyed, all sensors were once again rendered useless."

Kirk looked at Spock for a long time without speaking, then he moved forward and sat down opposite the Vulcan. "Let me get this straight. Are you saying that whatever it was we met down there was capable of overcoming the sensory distortion of the barrier in order to bring the ship here?"

"It would appear so, Captain."

"Then why had no one ever found this place before? There have surely been enough ships try to run the barrier in order to be the first to get to the center of the galaxy."

Spock shrugged slightly, a sure sign of his frustration at not being able to solve the puzzle. "Unknown, since none who tried ever returned. Perhaps no other ship penetrated the barrier at precisely the place we did."

"Seems a bit farfetched to me," Kirk said quietly.

"Perhaps so," Spock agreed. "Maybe Sybok had somehow made telepathic contact with that intelligence without realizing it, and the entity drew us to this precise spot through him." He was silent for a moment, then continued softly. "It was clear that whatever it was that we found down on that planet had intimate knowledge of my brother.... "

"How was that possible?" Kirk asked, intrigued.

"I do not know, Captain, but it could explain our present circumstances. I can offer no other logical explanation."

"Well, I suppose it's a good enough reason for now," Kirk said, sensing Spock's discomfort. He was silent for a moment, then he looked at the Vulcan. "Maybe other ships did make it this far and were destroyed by the entity. Maybe that is why they never got back out."

Serious brown eyes held Kirk's. "We have yet to get back out," Spock said simply.

Kirk nodded in agreement. "We have yet to get back out," he echoed. He took a deep breath, then got to his feet. "I guess it's time to bring the Klingons in on this." He looked at Spock. "Would you mind going and inviting First Officer Vixis to join us?"

"As you wish," Spock said, inclining his head. He rose to his feet. "Would you like me to escort her to briefing room 6?"

Kirk nodded. "I'll meet you there in a few minutes." He noticed Spock had not moved. "Problem?" he asked.

"Are you not concerned that her captain will take this act as a slight to his authority?" Spock answered.

"I don't much care how he takes it," Kirk answered bluntly. "I need his navigator. Besides, if I can sow a few seeds of dissension, then maybe I won't have to watch my back quite so carefully. Let's get out of here first, Spock, then we'll worry about bruised egos."

Kirk found himself smiling as the door shut behind the Vulcan. As many years as he lived with Humans, Spock would never learn to be devious. Kirk shook his head as he started for the door. It would be dangerous to work with the Klingons, but if he could win enough of them over, then maybe he would not have to worry so much about unfriendly phaser fire as the two ships groped their way to safety.



Styles walked onto the bridge of the Excelsior and looked around with satisfaction. He had been in command of many shakedown cruises for new starships, but never had he been in command of an actual mission. It rankled him that his first mission was to be the rescue of a man who he felt was an insult to Starfleet's military chain of command, but Caflisch had made it clear that he valued James Kirk, and Styles had finally decided that it was better not to argue about it. When he found Kirk there would be time enough to finally have it out.

"Navigation," he said as he sat down in the command chair, his swagger stick tapping his knee. "Plot a course to Nimbus Three." He looked at the helm. "Transwarp speed as soon as she'll take it, Lieutenant."

"Course plotted, sir," came the navigator's calm voice. "Laid in."

"Whenever you are ready helm," Styles said in a voice that did not quite contain his growing excitement.

"Executing, sir."

The Excelsior shuddered slightly and the starmap showing on the viewscreen shimmered and warped out of alignment as the ship sped forward. Styles sat still, his hand gripping his swagger stick so tightly that his knuckles turned white. In his mind he saw the picture of Kirk as he had slowly sat down in the command chair aboard the Enterprise while he, Styles, told Kirk that he would never sit in the captain's chair again. Had he been proven wrong! Although Kirk had been reduced in rank to captain, Styles knew that Kirk actually had been rewarded for going directly against the orders of Commander, Starfleet. He had been given the only thing he had ever wanted, the command of a starship, and every choice assignment continued to go to him. Yet it was Kirk and the new Enterprise who were now missing. If he was the one to find Kirk and return him safely to headquarters, then Starfleet could no longer ignore him and make fun of him. And Styles was determined to do just that.



Admiral Caflisch's face was no less grim than the two men who sat facing him on the viewscreen. Finally Vincent Sharpe of the Republic drew in a deep breath. "My Chief Engineer is a product of Montgomery Scott of the Enterprise, Admiral. We'll get more speed out of this ship than the builders would believe possible. Styles won't be alone for long out there."

"I sincerely hope not," Caflisch said fervently. "Get to Nimbus Three and find out anything that you can. Styles is under orders to keep in constant touch, but in the excitement of it all, I'm not too sure how he's going to act."

"I'm just glad I'm not on his ship," Captain Dnuelle commented, "and I'm afraid I **don't** have quite the qualified engineering staff that Sharpe has over there, so I don't know how much good I'm going to be able to do."

"I'd like you to stop on Nimbus Three then, Jake," Caflisch said. "Whatever has happened started there. We received distress calls from hostages, then nothing. We know the Romulans and the Klingons had representatives there, as well as the Federation, yet we have heard nothing from either Empire. Since the Federation is sending ships -- it's just as likely that they are as well, and I'm not sure it's a good idea to have the Klingons and Kirk in the same quadrant."

"Seems to me I heard rumors of a threat of some kind," Sharpe said innocently.

Caflisch drew in a deep breath. "That was no threat, gentlemen. The Klingons want Kirk dead. He has embarrassed them one time too many, and they aren't going to take it lying down anymore." He paused for a minute. "We need James Kirk, gentlemen, I think you would agree?"

Dnuelle nodded. "There sure hasn't been anyone coming along to replace him." He grinned suddenly. "Don't worry, Admiral. Wherever Kirk is, you can be sure he's on top of the situation. By the time we come screaming up on the scene, he'll probably be standing there aiming a phaser or two and laugh when we ask him if he needs help."

"I hope you're right," Caflisch said. "Well, I've held you up long enough, gentlemen, and I thank you for making an old man feel better. Good luck. I have a feeling you'll need it." As the screen dimmed to darkness, Caflisch leaned back in his chair. "Well, Jim, I've done all I can short of going out there myself. I only hope it's enough."



When Kirk walked into the briefing room, Spock was waiting for him, along with General Koord and First Officer Vixis. Kirk noted that Vixis was looking around the room with great interest.

Koord turned and faced him. "Commander Spock said that you wished to speak with us, Captain," he said, his voice firm and sounding a little peeved at the same time -- the tone that any Klingon would use when requested to cooperate with Federation members.

Kirk nodded, but his eyes were on Vixis. "A simple matter of returning to the open space of our galaxy, General." He fell silent and waited for Vixis to turn and face him.

She finally did. She looked him up and down in such a manner that Kirk was glad he did not blush easily. "I do not cooperate with Humans," she said finally, "especially not with James Kirk."

"May it be noted that I feel exactly the same about having to deal with you, Miss, uh.... "

Spock stared at Kirk. This was a deliberate insult, and Kirk knew it. What was he pressing for?

Vixis' face darkened at Kirk's words. "I am a commander in the Order of the Klingon Empire," she said hotly. "As such I outrank you, Captain!"

"I doubt that," Kirk said mildly, "but rank does not matter while you're here on my ship. I command here -- that is all that matters. I would suggest you remember that, and the others from your ship do the same." Kirk's hazel eyes bored into the angry brown ones that faced him, but it was the Klingon who changed expression first. "Good, I'm glad that's settled," Kirk said. "Has Commander Spock explained our problem to you?"

"I am not interested in **your** problems, Kirk," Vixis spat out.

"I am. I believe that you should be also, Commander," Koord said in a low voice. "From what I have heard, it appears my life could depend on it and I, for one, plan on returning home."

Kirk stepped forward. "We need your cooperation for only a short time, Commander," he said. "However, if you do not wish to give it, I am willing to send you back to your ship and you can take your own chances on getting out of here."

Vixis looked suspicious. "What do you mean, getting out of here?"

At Kirk's nod, Spock moved to stand beside his captain. "Have you had time recently to check your instruments?" he asked blandly.

Vixis looked from Spock to Kirk, then back again. "No," she said finally. "We only just arrived here before you insisted on beaming to our ship."

"Then I suggest that you contact your ship and ask what the sensor readings are telling them."

Vixis hesitated, then opened her communicator and barked out an order. Her face was like stone as she listened to the answer. "Sweet little thing, isn't she?" Kirk whispered to Spock.

Vixis snapped her communicator shut. "What have you done?" she demanded. "How have you managed to disable our ship? Captain Klaa must know.... "

"Leave your captain out of this," Kirk said harshly. "We haven't done anything to your ship. We are in the energy barrier that surrounds the center of this galaxy, and we've got to find a way out."

"What do you mean, we're in the barrier?" Vixis said hotly. "We followed you to this place -- our sensors were clear the whole way and I know that would not have happened if we had come into contact with the barrier."

"What he says is true, Commander," Koord said. "I was on their bridge myself when we entered the barrier, and there was complete sensory distortion -- none of their instruments worked, just as none of yours do now."

"Listen to your General, Commander," Spock spoke into the silence as Vixis stared at Koord. "Something brought us here and allowed you to follow, obviously with no obstruction until after you caught up with us."

"What was it?" Vixis demanded.

"We do not know, but it no longer exists," Spock continued, "and since it has ceased to exist, the barrier's distortion is back."

Kirk moved away from the Vulcan's side and walked across the room. As always, the simple action caused everyone's eyes to follow him. He finally turned back to face the others. "We have to be sure of where we are going, Commander," he said. "If we are not careful, we can unleash powers that you could not comprehend, resulting in the deaths of innocent people. Since you and your captain were instrumental in my rescue, we wish to make you the offer of escaping with us, or you can decline and risk going the wrong way, or never getting out."

"Why are you talking to me?"

"Because your job is navigation," Kirk said bluntly. "If the positions were reversed, you would be talking to my helmsman, not to me. We don't have time at the moment to follow the course that diplomacy dictates. We are talking about lives here, not egos."

Vixis looked at Kirk for a long term. His eyes held hers steadily, something that most men were unable to do, and she appreciated that show of strength. Whatever it was he was after, none of it showed in his face. She did not believe what he said -- that he simply wished to get out of the barrier safely. There must be something else here, something that she was missing. She wished that she could talk to Klaa, but it was obvious that Kirk would not allow it. She glanced over at Koord who was watching her as well. Perhaps there was an ally there. He had been a great commander in his time, and Vixis was not one of the foolish ones who thought that just because a certain age was attained that ability diminished. No, she would turn to Koord if she was to be separated from Klaa, and together they would defeat Kirk.

"All right," she said finally. "What is it you wish from me?"



"I do not trust her, Captain," Spock said as they left the briefing room.

Kirk turned and looked back down the corridor where Vixis was walking with her escort, followed by Koord. "I don't either," he said. "I don't think she bought what I said, but I hope I put enough of a threat into it that she'll at least try to help." He looked back at Spock. "I'd like you to go to sickbay for a checkup."

Spock stared at him. "For a what, Captain?"

"You heard me. I want McCoy to look you over."

"I assure you, Captain, I am fully functional," Spock protested.

"Functional, maybe, but I'd like a more educated opinion," Kirk said.

"Captain, I do not believe that Dr. McCoy could be considered more educated than.... "

"It won't work, Spock," Kirk said seriously. "You got hit by that thing we met down there, just as I did, and I know I'm not all right."

"You received a more direct hit," Spock started.

"A hit that McCoy says starts out small and ends up big." Kirk shook his head. "No, Spock, it's not going to work. While Vixis is in science station 3 retrieving the data from her ship, I want you in sickbay. I'll go find McCoy and send him down. I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't give him too hard a time, okay?"

Spock looked at Kirk. "Exactly what did Dr. McCoy say was wrong with you?" he asked suspiciously.

"Nothing that rest won't cure," Kirk said, knowing he was stretching the truth a good bit. "I just want to make sure he feels the same about you." He looked at Spock. "Things are apt to get a little rough around here. I want to be sure that my crew is up to whatever happens. Go on, Spock, do it as a favor to me, if for no other reason."

Spock sighed. He knew he could never refuse that tone of voice. "As you wish, Captain," he said finally, "but I assure you that Dr. McCoy will find nothing amiss."

"I'd feel better if I heard that from him," Kirk said.

"Very well, Captain. I shall retrieve my work from science station 3 and go straight to the sickbay." He nodded formally which was his way of letting Kirk know he was annoyed, then turned and walked away.

"I'm sorry, Spock," Kirk said softly as he watched him go, "but I'm not too sure how much longer I can keep going, and I have to be certain that you can." He waited until Spock was out of sight, then he steeled himself to go back to the forward observation lounge to get McCoy -- and to face Klaa, who would by now be seething at Vixis' disappearance.

Spock slowed down once he had turned the corner and was out of Kirk's sight. His stomach felt odd and he stopped to analyze it. He had not eaten recently, so it could not be that, yet it was a feeling he knew he had experienced before -- but why? He thought about the situation they were in and discarded that theory. They were not in immediate danger and he was reasonably sure that he would be able to compute a course back to their own space, so why did he feel like he did?

Shaking his head, he started walking again. He had two disks to pick up in the science station, then he would go to sickbay.

Vixis looked up as he entered the room. General Koord was still with her, as was a security officer and another man from the science branch. Spock nodded to him, silently approving his presence. "Well, Vulcan," Vixis said, "coming to check up on me?"

"On the contrary," Spock said formally, "I am merely retrieving some data I was working on earlier."

Vixis looked him over. "I've heard about you, Spock," she said finally.

Spock looked at her. "I am afraid I cannot say the same," he said, realizing that he was baiting her just as Kirk had.

Vixis shrugged. "That is not important." She got to her feet. "I have studied what we know about the Genesis planet," she continued. "I also understand that you had died of radiation poisoning.... "

"That is correct," Spock said as he walked across the room and picked up the tapes he needed.

"How can that be?" Vixis demanded. "You are obviously not dead!"

Spock turned to face her. "I suggest that you look up the definition of Genesis," he said mildly. "It has to do with creation." He suppressed a smile. He was beginning to understand the enjoyment of teasing someone who had no sense of humor. "I also suggest you return to your work. Captain Kirk will be waiting to receive the information you can give him about your ability to follow us here with no instrument distortion."

"He wouldn't understand it," Vixis spat.

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Captain Kirk was a brilliant navigator and helmsman before he rose to command," he said simply. "There are few departments on this ship

that he could not head. I suggest you do not forget that and try to trick him. You would be found out instantly." He bowed his head and left before Vixis had a chance to reply.

As he was walking down the corridor, Spock felt the same tenseness return to his stomach. He absently pressed a hand over it, again wondering what could be causing it. However, he was heading for sickbay. He could always ask McCoy.



Kirk found McCoy back at the reception, once again monopolizing Caithlin Dar. The Doctor took one look at him and groaned inwardly. He had seen that determined look on Kirk's face before, and he knew he was going to be elsewhere in a very short time. "Am I disturbing something, Doctor?" Kirk asked innocently as he walked up.

"You'd better believe it," McCoy shot back then he relented. "Captain Kirk, may I introduce Caithlin Dar, the Romulan representative to Nimbus Three."

"Miss Dar," Kirk acknowledged with a bow. "I believe the last time we met you had a phaser aimed at me."

Caithlin blushed. "I'm sorry, Captain, a diplomat is not supposed to use force as a tool of reason."

"Sybok didn't leave you much choice," McCoy broke in gallantly, then he turned to Kirk. "You have a problem?"

"Not really, I just came to tell you Spock is waiting for you in sickbay as scheduled."

"Spock is waiting.... Oh, Spock is waiting!" McCoy repeated as he finally understood what Kirk was talking about. "Yes, Captain, I'm on my way." He touched the Romulan's arm lightly. "I am sure that Captain Kirk will take good care of you, my dear," he said. He shot Kirk a look that needed no deciphering, then turned and walked out.

"Dr. McCoy is a true gentleman," Caithlin said as she watched him walk out the door.

Kirk agreed, but decided that whatever thoughts McCoy had at the moment, they were probably not on the gentlemanly side. His attention was then taken by Uhura's arrival, and he forgot about McCoy.



"Okay, Spock, what is this meeting about that I forgot I was having with you?" McCoy demanded as he walked into sickbay.

The Vulcan turned and looked at McCoy. "I believe I have been sent here for one of your physicals, Doctor."

"A physical? Are you hurting worse than before?"

Spock shook his head. "My shoulder is proving to be more painful than I anticipated, but it is not serious and I can deal with it."

"Um, much as I hate to admit it, I'll probably end up agreeing with you. Anything else?" McCoy asked as he got out his scanner. He looked up sharply, alerted by the silence that there was something else. "Well?" he asked.

Spock looked uncomfortable. "There is something else, Doctor," he said finally, "and I cannot account for it."

"Account for what?" McCoy asked.

Spock hesitated, then looked at McCoy. "My stomach hurts."

McCoy stared at him. "What do you mean, your stomach hurts?"

Spock looked embarrassed. "I cannot explain it, Doctor," Spock said, "but somehow I know I have felt this before -- a tightness in my abdomen.... " He drew in a deep breath as though he was going to say something else, but it remained unspoken.

"Come on, Spock," McCoy cajoled. "You were going to say something that you thought was important."

Spock shook his head. "It cannot be relevant," he said finally. "It does not make any sense."

"Let me make that decision, Spock. What is it?"

Spock now looked acutely embarrassed, but he managed to look directly at McCoy. "It happens every time I think of the Captain being hurt. I know in his present weakened condition that.... "

McCoy found he could not stop the grin from forming, although he tried his best to conceal it. "You've felt this before, you say?" he asked as Spock's voice died away.

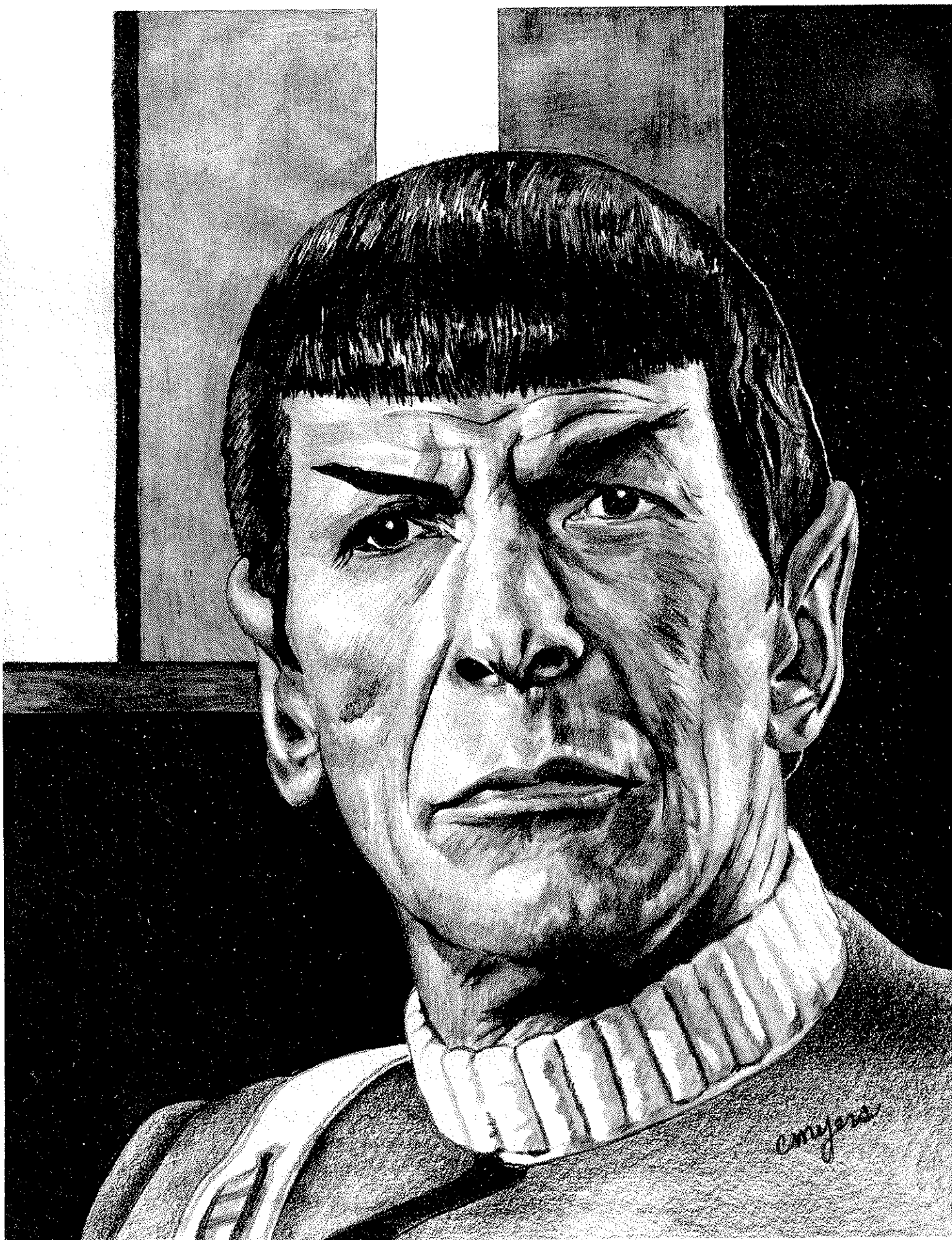
Spock's forehead creased as he struggled to remember. "I believe I must have," he said finally. "It is something from the past.... "

"Spock, come on over here and sit down, I need to examine you anyway," McCoy said, clapping his hand on Spock's arm. Once the Vulcan had seated himself in a chair, McCoy started running the scanner over him. "Your shoulder is a mess," he said briefly, "but there's no damage there that won't heal." He hesitated as what he had just said struck home. Spock was not showing any increased damage from the blast of energy the alien had shot at him. Why the hell wasn't he being affected like Jim was?

"Is there a problem, Doctor?" Spock asked, alerted by McCoy's silence that something was wrong.

"No," McCoy said absently, his thoughts still on this new development, "no problem. I'm going to take some tissue samples," he added, becoming more businesslike, "just to compare with those I took earlier, then I'll give you a shot to help deal with the discomfort." He tossed the scanner down on the desk and sat down on the edge of it himself. "As for your other problem, Spock, it's just a normal reaction when someone you care for is in danger.... "

Spock looked at him for a moment. "Then why is it I feel this when I think of the Captain, and no other?"



Once again McCoy was hard put to suppress the smile that was fighting to get out. "Perhaps because you are closer to him than you are to the rest of us, Spock, although you may not remember that yet. I don't know what happened to you back on Genesis, I doubt if any of us ever will, or how much of yourself was returned to you during the fall tor pan. I think that the emotional part of you is returning much more slowly than the intellectual part. But it's bound to come back, thrown as you are with those people and things that molded you in the first place. You know Jim is special to you, and you've been lucky enough for a while to not have the emotional part of your makeup interfere with the intellectual enjoyment of that fact. But now danger threatens, and suddenly you're starting to remember what the fear of loss does to a man. Don't fight it, Spock, it's a normal reaction, and it's only going to get worse, but there's nothing wrong with you -- we all feel it." He sobered. "Jim felt it as you died in front of our eyes. He felt it a million times more than you do now. Think of that the next time he worries about you, and you'll understand where he's coming from."

Spock sat looking at the floor while McCoy spoke. "A Vulcan would not feel such," he said quietly.

"Probably not," McCoy agreed, "but you're not wholly Vulcan, not in the emotions that really matter. T'Lar probably had all those feelings run through her as your katra passed through her from me to you. I had the emotions, but I think they were filtered out before they got to you. Now you have to relearn these emotions all over again, and it's going to be anything but easy." McCoy smiled slightly. "Go slow, Spock, but don't avoid it. Just remember, I'm here if you need help, but I think that Jim might understand even better than I do. Don't be afraid to open up to him. You put him through the wringer, whether you meant to or not, and it would probably do him a lot of good to realize that you do remember what held the two of you together. Don't forget that he's Human in every sense of the word. He can and will help you, Spock."

Spock finally looked up at McCoy. "I will not forget, Doctor. Thank you."

"You're welcome," McCoy said. "Now, let me get that sample and give you a shot, and don't hesitate to ask for another if your shoulder gets too painful."

"The Captain, is he.... "

McCoy looked up over the hypo he was preparing. "He's in worse shape than he'll admit to anyone, including himself. If we didn't have those damned Klingons aboard, I'd have him in here flat on his back." He smiled grimly as he pressed the hypo against Spock's arm. "I've treated him twice, Spock, and he's still in rough shape. I have a feeling he sent you here to make sure that one of you would be standing if the going gets tough. Considering he's thinking that far ahead, I would venture a guess that he feels it might not be him."

Spock felt his stomach lurch, a most unpleasant sensation that he had a feeling he had better get used to. "I trust it will not come to that, Doctor," he said fervently.

"I hope not, Spock, but for once he's not trying to be the superman he's usually tried to pull off in the past, which means he's in bad shape."

Spock slowly got to his feet. "I appreciate you warning me, Doctor. I shall do what I can to help him."

"You do that, Spock," McCoy said. "Maybe between us and with a lot of luck, nothing will happen."

Spock looked at him. "There will be nothing out of the ordinary happening so long as we remain in the barrier, Doctor. After that.... "

"I know," McCoy said quietly. "It's what comes after that that I'm worried about." He put the hypo down. "Well, I'd better get back to the forward observation deck and free Jim up. Where will you be?"

"Science station 3," Spock said.

"I'll tell him," McCoy said. He paused as he passed Spock, then turned back. "He'll be all right, Spock. He's been through worse."

"I hope so, Doctor," Spock said quietly.

Hope, McCoy thought, now I know you're hurting, and how you're hurting. Hope is not something the average Vulcan counts on! He walked out of sickbay wondering why he had not told Spock just how seriously Kirk was hurt, why he had said that Kirk had faced worse injuries. Perhaps he had suffered worse injuries, but he had never before had ongoing damage of the severity he was experiencing now. Was he protecting Kirk by allowing him to keep his own secret, or was he denying the problem simply because he had no answer? His best lab men were working on the problem and McCoy knew that being there himself would not speed up any possible discoveries. Being near Kirk and keeping an eye on his condition was the best he could do for all of them at the moment.



The U.S.S. Republic swung into orbit around Nimbus Three with all hands on battle alert. Vincent Sharpe had not exaggerated that his Engineer could do more with the ship than the builders had intended, and although the engines were red hot, they had made the trip more than a day ahead of the Hood.

"Contact whoever is in authority down there," he ordered the communications officer.

"Aye, sir."

Sharpe drummed his fingers on the arm of the command chair. "There was no sign of a starship orbiting the planet on our sensors when we approached," he mused. He glanced over at the helm. "Start scanning for any trail the Enterprise might have left, Lieutenant. It looks like we're going to have to chase her."

There was obviously a great deal of confusion reigning on the planet below and it took quite a long time to establish contact, but very little time for the crew of the Republic to find out what they wanted. The Federation representative was no longer there, nor were the Klingon or Romulan representatives. There were rumors that a starship had been there, but no one really seemed to know for sure.

"That lays that to rest," Sharpe said as he got to his feet. He walked over to the science station. "Find anything?" he asked, leaning over the operator.

"I think so, sir. There's a trail leading away from here.... " His voice trailed off as he read new data. "Bearing 45 mark 9." He looked up at Sharpe. "There's been more than one ship taking that bearing, sir, but I'm not sure if one of them is the Enterprise or not, or who would be following her."

"That's the only trail?" Sharpe asked.

"Yes, sir, that's all I can find."

Sharpe straightened up, then looked over at the helm. "Wide scan, helm. Let's see if we can see anything out there."

Nimbus Three disappeared from view and a star scan filled the large screen -- but only stars, nothing else showed up. Sharpe's first officer, Kent Shore, came to stand beside him. "Nothing much to go on there, sir."

Sharpe shook his head. "Nothing but a hunch, Commander."

"A hunch, sir?"

"Kirk took the Enterprise away from here for some reason, and I'd bet a month's pay that someone else is on his tail."

"That atom trail shows there's more than one ship on that course," said Lt. Potter from his station. "If the Enterprise is on that bearing, I'd say she's got a small fleet after her."

Sharpe turned around. "A fleet?" he asked sharply.

Potter nodded. "Three or four ships at a guess."

"But are any of them ours?" Shore murmured.

"Shit!" Sharpe swore suddenly. "That hostage message must have made it to the Klingons and the Romulans.... "

"You think they've sent ships?" Shore asked.

"I **know** they have!" Sharpe said as he made for the command chair. "Commander Wilson, contact Starfleet and get hold of Admiral Caflisch. Potter, plot a course to follow those ships. Helm, warp 8 as soon as she'll take it." Within minutes they had left Nimbus Three far behind, Sharpe had talked to Admiral Caflisch and was now talking to Jake Dnuelle of the Hood.

"I've just talked to Caflisch, Jake, and he agrees with me. Someone is after Kirk. We don't know who yet, but we've got all sensors on wide scan and we should know soon. Veer off your course -- we'll send you constant reports on our position. Keep cutting corners and catch up as soon as you can."

"Will do, Vince," Dnuelle said. "I wish we could get your speed, but this old ship's just not up to the pounding. But we'll be on full alert and all weapons will be powered up and ready. Just keep in touch."

"We will be, believe me," Sharpe said. "I only hope we get there in time."

"Hey, relax," Dnuelle said with a grin. "Remember what I said back there when we talked to Caflisch — Kirk can take care of himself. We're going to go flying in and he's going to be sitting there with that shitty grin of his and asking us where the fire is."

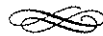
"Yeah," Sharpe agreed, relaxing a little, "you're probably right."

"Trust me on this one," Dnuelle said. "I'll be looking forward to hearing from you. Hood out."

Sharpe leaned back in his seat. It was good to have someone like Jake at your back keeping a level head. Then he suddenly remembered the Excelsior and started to panic again. If Styles was on this same heading and got into a tussle with either the Romulans or the Klingons, the Federation's new technology would be as good as given to the other side. "Shit!" he swore again. "Helm, get as much speed as you can and don't let up unless McMurty tells you we're going to blow up."

"Aye, sir, warp nine now."

Ouch, Sharpe thought. That's a little too much speed for comfort, but we've got to risk it. Until we know what's happening out there, we've got to hold power.



"Where is my first officer, Kirk?" Klaa asked in a menacing voice as he slowly advanced towards the Human. "I saw your security men remove her and I want to know what has happened to her!" His right hand clenched into a fist, and unwanted memories of the damage another Klingon fist had done to him welled up in Kirk's mind.

"General Koord is with her, Captain," Kirk said evenly, his face and voice giving away none of his apprehension. He knew he was no match for Klaa at the moment — he was too badly hurt and a fight would be a very one-sided one. "You have nothing to worry about."

"Koord is a fool," Klaa spat out.

Kirk met his eyes squarely. "Is that why you followed his orders not to kill me, and allowed me to go back to my ship? You are willing to follow a fool so easily?"

Klaa's fist moved so quickly that Kirk stood no chance. The blow knocked him backwards right into McCoy's arms. An iron hand stayed Klaa's next blow and the Klingon was spun around to look into the darkened face of General Koord. "So I am now a fool, am I?" Koord asked in a menacing voice. "It just so happens, Captain, that your First Officer and I have been working to find a way back to the safety of our space while you have been standing here obviously making a fool of yourself."

"Didn't see you come in," Kirk said in a low voice as McCoy helped him back into an upright position.

"Just arrived, and just in time, I'd say," McCoy replied. "You've got blood running out of your mouth."

Kirk wiped his mouth, but he never took his eyes off Klaa. "How's Spock?" he asked McCoy.

"He's fine. He's with Vixis. They think they might have found the coordinates for getting out of here." He glanced over at the Klingons. "The General was starting to worry about leaving Klaa up here on his own. I can see that worry was well founded." He looked back at Kirk. "You okay?"

Kirk nodded. "I had managed to avoid him until now, and I think I lost face in doing so." He turned around as he heard the door open and Spock and Vixis walked in together, along with the security guard. One glance told Spock that something was wrong and he quickly moved to Kirk's side, just as Vixis went to stand by Klaa. Two strong warriors standing by their leader — one side committed to peace, but not afraid to fight; the other sworn to take whatever they considered theirs, and who had sworn to kill Kirk.

Kirk's eyes returned to fix on Klaa, even after Koord released him. "Any luck?" he asked Spock without taking his attention from Klaa.

"Affirmative," Spock said.

Kirk nodded. "There is a conference room adjoining this one, gentlemen," he said. "I suggest we move there and discuss this problem undisturbed." He looked over at the security guards. "Wait outside. I'll call you when we need another escort." He looked back at the Klingons. "Gentlemen, if you please.... "

Once inside the conference room, Kirk walked across to the table and sat down. "I prefer to stand," Klaa said stubbornly.

"As you wish," Kirk said amiably, but his eyes were like ice. Spock and McCoy sat down beside Kirk, and Koord took a seat on the opposite side of the table. Vixis stood beside her captain. Kirk looked at Spock. "Well?"

"Our hypothesis was correct, Captain. We are indeed in the barrier, but with the information gained from the Klingon computers, we think we know the way back, assuming the readings have not been too badly distorted by the force field. We can try leaving at any time."

"You're a traitor," Klaa spat at Vixis. "You helped the enemy!"

Vixis whirled on Klaa. "Why should I not. We are as helpless here as they are. I, for one, do not wish to die uselessly.... "

"Listen to her, Klaa," Kirk said, his voice low, but it had the ring of steel, "... and listen to me. Your goal may be to kill me, but you're not going to do it here in this muck. Your instruments don't work, and weapons systems are chancy at best. It is not logical to forfeit your life solely to kill one man." He smiled grimly. "No doubt you'll have other chances, but for right now I'm willing to beam you back to your ship and leave here together. Once we're out of the barrier, then we can face each other.... "

"You talk bravely, Kirk," Klaa said, and there was no missing the taunt in his voice. "A Federation starship has far more firepower than a Klingon bird of prey."

Kirk stared at him. "I don't remember saying anything about a fair fight," he said finally. "As far as I can tell, that is not the Klingon way. I seem to recall an instance where a bird of prey destroyed an unarmed Federation science vessel -- and a Klingon bully murdered a defenseless scientist.... " Kirk's voice dropped to almost a whisper as he got to his feet. "Don't talk to me about what's fair!" Kirk's rage and pain rang out through his words and Klaa, in spite of himself, stepped back. Without understanding why, he knew he was standing in front of a very dangerous man, a man who, he suddenly realized, was not afraid to die.

A smile slowly spread across Kirk's face as he watched Klaa's retreat, and he knew his message had been received. There was no way Klaa could know of David's death, and Kirk was not disinclined to make him pay for it, and he knew Klaa understood that. "What is it to be, Captain? Leave now, while you can and come with us to safety, or perhaps spend the rest of the time allotted to us trying to destroy each other? The choice is yours."

McCoy found himself holding his breath. Standing in front of him once again was the man who had taunted death back at Yosemite. Once again Kirk was reliving the reasons for that taunting, and the result was the same -- he was courting death as a way of stopping pain that would never end.

Kirk could not know what effect his smile had on Klaa. The Klingon could deal with anger and hate, but Kirk's look of anticipation completely unnerved Klaa. He stood his ground for a few more minutes, then he looked over at Koord. "You are the senior officer, General," he said. "I defer to you.... "

Koord looked at Klaa in astonishment, but quickly recovered. He nodded to Klaa, then turned away and completely ignored him, further adding to Klaa's embarrassment. "It shall be as you say, Captain Kirk. I shall return to the bird of prey with my comrades, and First Officer Vixis will cooperate with your navigator. We will accompany you out of here but what happens after that.... " He shrugged his shoulders.

Kirk nodded. "Understood, General. Once out, we return to the status quo." He signalled for the waiting security guards. "General Koord and the others are returning to their ship. You will escort them to the transporter room and then, Lt. Noren, you are to report to me on the bridge."

"Aye, sir." Noren stepped back politely to allow the Klingons to walk out in front of him. Koord stopped at the door and waited for the others to get out of earshot, then he turned back to Kirk. "I will do all I can to control Klaa," he said to Kirk, "but I cannot promise success. He is determined, Captain, and he has been embarrassed in front of his crew -- and in front of Vixis.... "

Kirk nodded. "I understand, General. Thank you for the warning."

Koord nodded. "I have not met many I felt to be my equal, Captain," he continued. "As such, I salute you."

Kirk looked at him steadily. "I consider that a compliment, General, thank you."

Koord bowed his head. "To whatever is ahead of us then," he said. He turned and walked out the door.

The three Federation men stood in silence for a minute, then Kirk started forward. "We'd better collect the bridge crew and get ready." He took a careful breath, and looked at McCoy. "I've got to stay on my feet just a little longer, Doctor.... "

"Can't you turn command over to Spock?" McCoy asked. "Our visitors are gone.... "

"Not gone, Bones, they're still out there, and Koord has just warned us that he has little control over Klaa. No, we're not out of the woods yet."

McCoy glanced over at Spock, then looked back at Kirk. "Okay," he said finally, "but this is the last one."

Kirk's expression turned grim. "It's all I'll need. This thing is going to get settled one way or the other as soon as we break free of the barrier."

"That's not very comforting news," McCoy said quietly.

"No," Kirk agreed, "it's not." He looked at Spock. "Get to the bridge and work with Chekov. I want the ship ready to leave as soon as I get there."

"I shall tell Mr. Scott to have all weapons brought to full power," Spock said quietly.

Kirk nodded, appreciating the Vulcan's understanding and not trying to talk him out of using force. "Thank you," he said quietly. Spock nodded, then turned and left the room. Kirk looked back at McCoy, no longer trying to hide the pain and exhaustion he was feeling. "Just a little longer," he said, and McCoy could not tell if he was saying it to himself or to the doctor.

"Hey, Jim, it's going to be all right," McCoy said, putting a hand on Kirk's arm.

Kirk looked at McCoy, his eyes full of sadness, a look that tore right through to McCoy's soul. "Is it, Bones?" he asked. "So many have died, and once again he is out there waiting.... "

"Koord will manage Klaa somehow," McCoy said, trying to bolster Kirk's flagging spirits.

The hazel eyes slowly cleared, and Kirk looked back at McCoy. "I wasn't thinking of Klaa, Bones," he said quietly. "I was talking about Death."

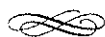
McCoy stared at Kirk, remembering the last time they had talked of death. "Hey," he said softly, "you're not alone."

Kirk glanced at him, then a small smile showed at the corners of his mouth in acknowledgment of McCoy's support. "I know, Bones," he said, then he looked away. "Come on, let's go. We've got work to do."

McCoy hesitated. Kirk had just neatly avoided telling him whatever it was he had been thinking about, and McCoy knew it was serious. Klaa had stirred up something that was best left dormant, and now Kirk was suffering mentally as well as physically. The question was, was he hurting badly enough to lash out and hurt back?

"Hey, are you coming?" Kirk's voice from the door interrupted McCoy's thoughts.

"Yeah, I'm coming," McCoy answered. He knew he would have no time to talk to Kirk now. Whatever was going to happen would happen. He wondered if he could possibly get Spock alone. Maybe if Spock was warned, he could be on the lookout for trouble. McCoy would give it a try, anyway, once he got back from a side trip to the lab. He had not received a report recently, and Kirk needed help now! He started forward after his captain's fast disappearing figure.



"Captain, I am reading ships off our port side.... "

Styles was on his feet instantly. "Whose?" he asked eagerly. "Admiral Caflisch said he was sending the Republic and Hood after us. They must have really turned on the steam if they're here already."

Mark Stuter, his First Officer, shook his head as he watched the computer readout. "No, sir, they are not from the Federation.... " His voice died away as he read the rapidly changing information. "Three ships, sir, a Klingon flagship and two battlecruisers." He looked up. "They are following the same coordinates we did to come to the barrier. They must be after the Enterprise as well."

Styles hit his leg with his swagger stick. "They must not find us here. Until we are sure it is the Enterprise's trail we are following, I do not want to contact Starfleet. In any case, I don't want the Klingons picking up any transmission that would tip them off that we are here. If we stay in transwarp speed, they won't see us on their scanners." He looked at the helm. "Transwarp drive, Lieutenant, immediately!"

"Aye, sir."

The Excelsior shuddered slightly and the stars streaked as they fled past the viewscreen. Stuter got to his feet and walked over to where Styles was standing. "Perhaps Starfleet should know of this latest development, Captain," he said quietly. "As you said, we are expecting backup, and they shouldn't head straight into a trap."

Styles continued to look at the viewscreen. "We will contact Starfleet when I know exactly what is going on, Commander. Who knows, the Klingons might just be passing through. We must only send definite information, not wild guesses."

Stuter looked at Styles for a minute. "Is that why you did not inform them of the heading we took away from Nimbus Three?"

Styles looked at him impatiently. "Of course. How do we know whose trail we were following? There are many ships in this galaxy."

"There was only one trail," Stuter said stubbornly.

"So you've said before," Styles said, "and I'm getting tired of hearing about it. Go back to your sensors, Mr. Stuter. I do not want to miss something important because we are standing here arguing complete nonsense."

Stuter opened his mouth, then thought better of it. He turned and went back to his station. If Klingons were following the energy trail left by the Enterprise, then the

Romulans could easily be doing the same thing. And there were the Federation ships to worry about as well.



The bridge crew were working with an air of high anticipation when Kirk arrived. Spock had told them of the possibility of combat when they broke through the barrier, and they were all making sure that their stations were ready.

Lt. Noren was waiting just outside the turbolift doors and snapped to attention as Kirk stepped onto the bridge. I've got to remember to tell him not to do that, Kirk thought to himself, but acknowledged the salute with a nod of his own. "Good, Lieutenant, I'm glad you're here." He walked over to Uhura's station. "Did Dr. McCoy send a list of names from sickbay?"

"Yes, sir," Uhura said, "it's right here."

Kirk glanced at the list and frowned when he read the number. "We don't have enough personnel as it is," he said quietly, then he held the list out to Noren. "I want you to take some of your men and find these crewmembers. Apologize to them for me, but say that for their own safety, I want them to accompany you to the brig."

Noren looked at Kirk, surprise showing on his face. "The brig, sir?"

Kirk nodded. "Tell them that they are susceptible to some very deadly radiation as we pass through the barrier. The brig is fully lined with tetanium which has proven capable of blocking any kind of radiation known to us. Tell them I'd rather have them suffer some discomfort for a short time than to die rather horribly later."

Noren looked at the list, then back up at Kirk. "Aye, sir, I'll get on this right away."

"You have twenty minutes, Lieutenant," Kirk said grimly.

"Yes, sir!" Noren fairly sprinted from the bridge.

Spock walked over to where Kirk was standing. "There were more than you anticipated?" he asked.

Kirk nodded. "You'd think Starfleet would screen people more carefully," he said, a hint of anger in his voice. "We are working with less than a skeleton crew already, and now we have eleven less."

"We will make it out safely," Spock said quietly.

"But what happens then?" Kirk asked. "Klaa's out there.... "

"So is General Koord," Spock pointed out. "Do not underestimate him, Captain. He may have been put out to pasture as you put it, but you have given him back his pride. That pride made him the great officer that he was -- a better officer than Klaa will ever be.... " He looked at Kirk with a serious expression. "He said you were his equal. That should be enough to give you some confidence in him."

Kirk glanced at Spock for a second with a slight smile on his face, then he turned his attention back to the viewscreen where the misty-blue planet still filled the screen. "I guess we'll never know what that place is," he said. "Maybe it really isn't there; maybe it's just a nebulous presence, as unreal as the Genesis planet was."

Spock looked at the viewscreen for a time without speaking, then he drew in a deep breath. "Your son's final resting place is out there in that vast universe. Perhaps that is where my brother is also destined to rest."

Kirk nodded. "Perhaps it is the best place." He glanced over at Spock. "They both died to save others, Spock. We have to remember that."

Spock nodded. "Yes, we have to remember that." He hesitated for a moment, then went on, not looking at Kirk. "We owe it to their memories that we do nothing to denigrate their sacrifice."

Kirk turned to him. "Meaning what?" he asked suspiciously.

Spock still did not look at Kirk. "I mean nothing, Captain. It is simply something to remember as we continue through life."

"Captain," Uhura broke into their conversation. "Lt. Noren just called in to say that everything is secure, and he has six minutes to spare."

Kirk smiled in spite of himself. "The confidence of youth," he said to no one in particular. "All right, everybody, it's time to get out of here."

The turbolift doors opened to admit McCoy. He looked quickly at Spock, but the Vulcan had just moved to the science station and McCoy knew now was not the time to disturb him. He walked down to the command chair where Kirk was just getting settled. "Our sightseeing tour's over, I take it?" he asked.

Kirk nodded. "You'd better find something to hang onto, Doctor. The trip will be smooth until we hit friendly skies, then who knows.... "

"Thanks for the confidence builder," McCoy muttered as he backed up to the railing and got a secure hold. However, his unasked question had been answered. Kirk was still in control and capable of command. He did not have to step in -- yet.

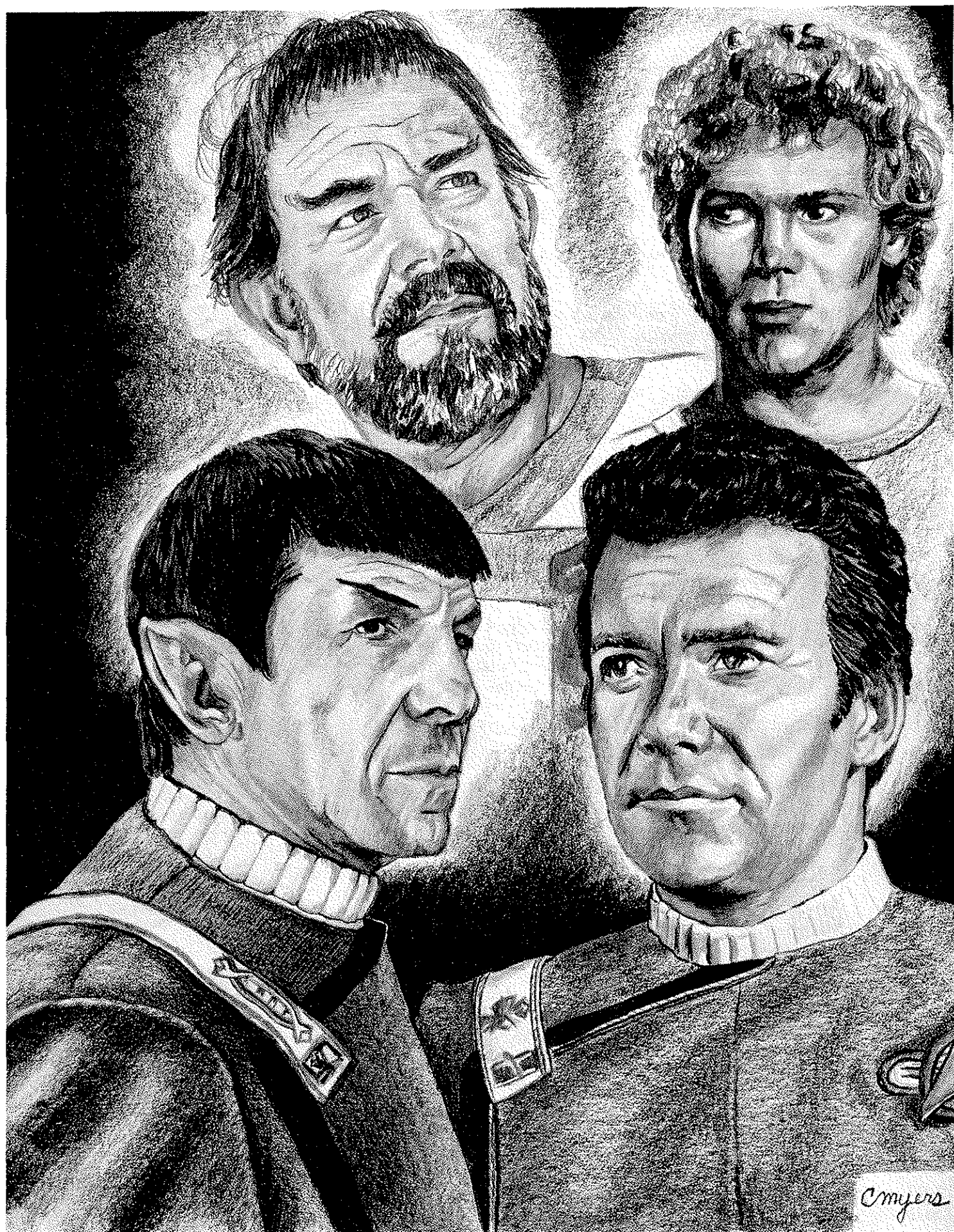
Kirk looked over at Scotty. "Shields on maximum, Mr. Scott?"

"Aye, sir, and all weapons systems are on full."

Kirk nodded. "Mr. Chekov, course is plotted?"

"Plotted and laid in, sir," Chekov answered, throwing a quick look over at Spock who nodded reassuringly.

"Then contact the bird of prey, Uhura," Kirk ordered. "Spock will double check the coordinates.... "



"Aye sir."

"Mr. Sulu, ready to leave at warp one."

"Warp one, sir."

"The Klingons have sent word that they will assume position on our starboard side, Captain. Captain Klaa says that will give neither ship an advantageous position from which to launch an attack."

That's big of him, Kirk thought to himself. "Acknowledge that message, Uhura. All right, Mr. Sulu, take us out of here."

As soon as the large ship started to swing around, the planet disappeared and the viewscreen was filled with the eerily familiar flashes of energy that Kirk remembered from years before. No instruments exploded, but he could sense the skin of the ship absorbing the jolting blasts as she slowly groped her way through the multi-hued barrier.

"Are we still on course, Spock?" Kirk asked, knowing what the answer would be, but needing the reassurance of the Vulcan's voice.

"Instruments are not working, Captain, but I can assure you that the computer is keeping us on course."

"How long before we get out?"

"Unknown. We do not know how far we went in."

Kirk glanced over at him, then his eyes went back to the fireworks that filled the screen in front of him. How long? he wondered. How long before fate once again reaches out and shakes us. How long before we are once again fighting for our lives -- resuming the fight that David and Sybok gave their lives for? Klaa's not about to let us go. There's going to be more death and I don't know if I'm up to it. He looked around the bridge at the anxious faces. So many of these people were so important to him. He had watched Spock die. Was he going to have to watch the others die too?



"Captain, the Hood is coming up on our port side.... "

Vincent Sharpe breathed a sigh of relief. "Any sign of the Excelsior?" he asked.

"No, sir, not yet."

Where the hell has Styles managed to get to? Sharpe wondered. You'd think with transwarp drive he would have been here ages ago. "Okay, contact Captain Dnuelle."

There was a brief pause, then Dnuelle's face appeared on the screen. "I didn't know there could be so many course changes to get anywhere in the galaxy," he said, half-laughing. "What's up?"

"Klingons ahead, a flagship and a couple of heavy cruisers."

"Wonderful," Dnuelle replied. "Where's Styles?"

"Heaven only knows. He doesn't appear to be anywhere around here."

"Any sign of the Enterprise?" Dnuelle asked.

"No, but the Klingons haven't moved since we got here, so maybe they know something we don't. I think we should try getting a little closer."

"Okay," Dnuelle said. "I've always wanted to be outnumbered by the other side. It makes life more interesting. Shall we go in side by side, or from opposite ends?"

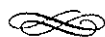
"Opposite ends, I think," Sharpe said. "We'd better be ready to fight. They wouldn't have a flagship here unless they were really serious about something."

"Agreed," Dnuelle said. "Well, here's to luck. We'll see you on the other side... "

"Of the battle, I hope," Sharpe said.

"Whatever," Dnuelle replied, a grin spreading across his face. "Good hunting."

"Same to you," Sharpe said with a wave of his hand. "Republic out." He looked at his communications officer. "Okay, hit battle alert. Let's go see what these Klingons are looking at."



"Captain, we're out!" Sulu's voice rang through the bridge as the brightly colored energy faded and the welcome blackness of their galaxy filled the screen along with the scattering of far flung stars.

"Evasive maneuvers, immediately," Kirk ordered.

"Captain, Klingons dead ahead. Three ships.... " Spock's voice momentarily froze everybody.

"What the hell?" McCoy said, starting forward.

"Are the shields still on full, Scotty?" Kirk asked.

"Aye, sir."

"Captain," Spock's voice came again. "Two ships are approaching the Klingons from opposite directions, travelling at approximately warp six."

"Two ships?" Kirk echoed, looking back at the viewscreen. "Whose are they?"

All eyes went to Spock who was glued to the scanner readouts. "Federation ships, sir. The Republic and Hood."

"Uhura, break silence and contact the Hood. Find out what's going on."

The Enterprise was suddenly rocked by a phaser blast. "The bird of prey, sir," Chekov said.

"So much for a peaceful solution," Kirk said under his breath. "Evasive action, Sulu. Hold fire if you can, Chekov, until we find out what's happening."

"I've got Captain Dnuelle, Captain," Uhura said.

Kirk hit communications. "Jake, this is Jim Kirk. What the hell's going on?"

"Damned if I know, Jim," came Dnuelle's voice over the intercom. "We were sent to look for you and we caught up with these other gentlemen, who I think are also looking for you, but probably not for the same reason."

Kirk could not stop the smile. "Probably not," he agreed. "Have they shown any hostility yet?" As he asked the question, Kirk could hear the sound of phaser fire.

"Actually, we just received a welcome shot from their flagship," Dnuelle said after a brief silence. "Shall we adopt the Blooto score?"

"Sounds good to me," Kirk said as another phaser shot glanced off the Enterprise, "but I've got a previous commitment with someone over here who's determined to take me on, so I'm afraid I'm going to have to concentrate on him."

"No problem. Sharpe's coming up on their flank. We'll try to hold them until you free yourself up. Dnuelle out."

Kirk looked at the viewscreen. "All right, Mr. Sulu, if it's a fight Klaat wants, it's a fight he'll get. Ahead warp two." This one's for you, David, Kirk promised. Maybe Spock's right in saying that we should not drag your death down into the gutter, but that's where we are, and that's how this fight's going to go. So I'll avenge you, the son I never knew. At least for once there will be a reason...

The Enterprise ducked and whirled, but the bird of prey was smaller and more maneuverable. However, fast as she was, the Klingons were unable to hit any crippling shots. Sulu was just too good a navigator.

"Ready photon torpedoes, Chekov?" Kirk said, his eyes never leaving the screen.

"Yes, sir," Chekov replied, his finger hovering over the control to activate the deadly weapons.

"On my count," Kirk continued. He had detected a pattern the bird of prey was following and he was going to use it against her. The ship lurched a bit from another hit. "Steady as she goes, helm," Kirk said quietly, his eyes narrowing as he saw the bird of prey swooping around. "Be ready, Chekov."

Tension filled the bridge. In the background Uhura reported that the other Federation ships were managing to hold their own with the rest of the Klingon fleet, but would appreciate the Enterprise arriving at her earliest possible convenience.

Kirk nodded understanding, but his eyes, like everyone else's, never left the viewscreen. They were watching the ship that was quickly filling the screen. "Be ready, Mr. Chekov," Kirk said softly.

"Bird of prey fifty thousand kilometers," Sulu reported. "Forty thousand.... thirty.... "

"Captain, the bird of prey just dropped her shields."

"What?" Kirk spun around to look at Spock. "Are you sure?"

The Vulcan looked up at Kirk, an eyebrow raised at the absurdity of the question. "Quite sure, sir. Their shields have dropped."

Kirk swung back to the viewscreen. "It's Koord!" he said with sudden certainty. "They've lost communications somehow and he's letting us know that Klaa's no longer a threat!" You are my equal, Kirk, I salute you.

"As I salute you," Kirk said softly to the bird of prey, now floating harmlessly in space.

"Reminds you of another commander, doesn't it?" came McCoy's voice from beside his shoulder. "The good ones are good, no matter who they represent."

Kirk glanced up at McCoy. "The good ones are good," he agreed. He got up from the command chair. "Let's go and help the others. Spock, keep working with Chekov. I don't want this to end up as a gutter fight."

"A gutter fight, Captain?" Spock asked.

"I'll explain later," Kirk promised. "All right, gentlemen, let's wrap this skirmish up so we can go home. As I recall, we're still on shore leave, or should be.... "

McCoy grinned. Whatever had been bothering Kirk earlier seemed to be gone for the moment. He sobered as he thought of what was waiting for them out there, but maybe they would get through it somehow in one piece and make it back to Earth.



"Captain, the Klingons have attacked!"

Styles perched on the edge of his command chair. "Attacked whom? How many ships?"

Stuter studied the scanner. "Federation ships — hey, there's the Enterprise!"

Styles was beside Stuter in an instant. "The Enterprise? Where did she come from?"

Stuter looked up at him. "While we've been barreling around out here in transwarp drive, she must have emerged from the barrier." He stared at the small screen. "She's fighting with a bird of prey. There are two other ships — they must be the Republic and the Hood. That's five against three, sir. We have to go in now!"

Styles hesitated. "I don't know," he said. "Maybe we should wait. We still have surprise on our side."

"Surprise!" Stuter shot to his feet. "Captain, they are outnumbered and good as they are, they are going to need help. We can't just wait out here and do nothing!"

"No, no, of course you're right," Styles said. "We must help." He turned to the bridge crew. "Sound red alert and activate weapons. Leave transwarp drive immediately and go to warp seven. Helm, you will head right for the bird of prey and disable her. Our mission is to rescue Kirk, so we will deal with that problem first." He moved to the command chair and sat down, pulling the safety restraints over his legs. "Execute now!" he ordered firmly.

The Excelsior came screaming at full warp drive into the battle, nearly colliding with the Klingon flagship on her way to where the Enterprise was just starting away from the bird of prey.

"Target lined up, Captain," the weapons officer said from his station at the side of the bridge.

"Fire!" Styles ordered, caught up by the excitement of the moment.

The ship vibrated as the deadly phaser fire streaked from the weapons hold. The bird of prey rocked from the hit and immediately started to list, obviously severely damaged.

"Good shooting!" Styles said.

Kirk stood by Sulu's helm, staring in disbelief at the disabled Klingon ship showing on the viewscreen. "Who the hell did that?" he demanded.

Spock looked up from his scanner. "I believe the Excelsior just arrived from transwarp drive," he said quietly.

"Styles!" Kirk said grimly. "Damn him. That man isn't qualified to fly a toilet seat!" He whirled around. "Uhura, get hold of him now!"

"Aye, sir." There was a moment's silence, then Uhura turned back. "Captain Styles on screen, sir."

"Well, Captain Kirk.... " Styles started.

Kirk interrupted Styles before he could say anything more. "Captain, you damned well get that ship of yours out of this quadrant and back to Federation headquarters or I swear to you that I will blow that flying bathtub out of existence myself!"

"Now wait just a minute, Kirk," Styles responded hotly. "I was sent to get you out of the mess you have obviously managed to get yourself into. Starfleet has finally discovered just how incompetent you are.... "

"I wouldn't respond to that, Jim." McCoy's voice came from behind Kirk. "He's not worth the trouble. There are others out there who need your help."

Kirk visibly swallowed what he had been about to say, and managed to take a deep, shuddering breath and get his temper back under control. "You just attacked an unarmed ship, Styles. The bird of prey had surrendered and her shields were down. How the hell do you expect me to explain that to the Klingons, to General Koord's compatriots out there?"

"General Koord is on that ship?" Styles asked, his face growing pale.

"Was on that ship," Kirk answered grimly. "By the looks of her, I doubt if he is any longer. I would suggest that you get out of here as fast as that fancy power of yours will take you, or so help me, I'll do it for you."

"I didn't know he was aboard," Styles whined.

"Fine," Kirk said, making no further effort to hide his anger. "You go ahead and contact the Klingons over there and tell them that. I'm sure they would be happy to accept an apology for so utterly stupid an action."

"No, no," Styles stuttered. "You... you're probably right. It would be better if we just left quietly."

"I would not leave only quietly, I'd leave fast and get into transwarp drive as soon as you can. Then go straight back to home base, Captain, and be ready to answer for your actions because, by god, you're going to have to once Admiral Caflisch hears what you've done."

"Kirk, it wasn't my fault!" Styles pleaded.

Kirk could not believe the way Styles was acting in front of his crew, but he felt no pity for the man. "You had better believe I'm going to tell him, Styles, so you'd better get back there and start buttering him up, because you're going to need all the help you can get. Kirk out." The screen went blank with Styles still protesting his innocence. Kirk stood up, wincing a little as pain shot through his chest. "Status report, Spock?"

"There has been no movement from the bird of prey, sir. I would advise leaving her and going to the aid of the Republic and Hood."

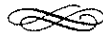
Kirk turned to him. "Are they in serious trouble?" he demanded.

Spock shook his head. "Not yet, but they are still outnumbered and I should think they would appreciate whatever help we can give them."

Kirk glanced back at the Klingon ship sitting so still in space. "I hate to leave her," he said. "Someone might still be alive over there."

McCoy walked up and stood beside Kirk. "Our people are important too, Jim. I understand your respect for Koord, but there's still a battle to be fought out there, with our own people against his."

Kirk stood silent for a moment longer, then he nodded. "You're right, Doctor." He sat down in the command chair. "All right, Mr. Sulu, let's see what the others need.... "



The Klingon battleships were finding they had their hands full as the two pesky Federation starships started their attack and dart strikes.

"They refuse to hold still, General," his gunnery officer complained. "Each time I shoot they are somewhere else.... "

"General Keb, he's here!" His navigator cried out.

"He's here? Who's here? Make yourself clear, you idiot!" Keb demanded.

The navigator turned around. "The Enterprise, sir, she has just appeared on the viewscreen!"

Keb leapt to his feet. "Put the screen on maximum -- let me see!"

The starfield shimmered out of sight to be replaced by a graceful silver vessel that was just pulling away from an obviously disabled bird of prey. "Whose ship is that?" Keb demanded. "There should be no bird of prey in this quadrant!"

There was silence while the science officer worked with the computer. "She is under the command of Captain Klaa, sir," came the response.

"Klaa! I should have known it would be that rebel. He could never follow orders, and now look where it's got him." He turned back to his navigator. "We will commence an attack on the Enterprise, leaving the others to deal with those Federation ships." He walked over to his weapons officer. "You will destroy Kirk's ship. There are to be no survivors, is that understood?"

"Understood, General."

Keb moved back to the command chair. "You have your orders. Attack now!"



"Captain," Spock's voice sounded unnaturally calm. "The Klingon flagship has broken away from the others and is heading in this direction at warp 4." He looked up. "I believe we are their target."

Kirk nodded grimly, knowing that the entire bridge were remembering the same threat that he was, **There will be no peace as long as Kirk lives!** "I don't think there's any doubt," he replied, glancing at Spock. He sat up straighter in the command chair, then pressed open the ship-wide communication from the armrest. "This is the Captain speaking. We are about to undergo an attack from the Klingon flagship. I believe their mission is to destroy this ship and all aboard. We are in for a fight, gentlemen, and one that we must win at all costs. All hands -- man your stations. Kirk out." He pressed the communications closed, then looked at Sulu. "The Hood and Republic are using the Blooto score until we can get there to help out, Mr. Sulu. Our fight here is going to be one to the death, and we will fight by those rules. Do whatever you deem necessary to keep this ship safe."

"Aye, sir," Sulu said, and the calm assurance in his voice steadied everyone's nerves.

Kirk turned to Uhura. "Contact Sharpe and Dnuelle and tell them we're about to come under heavy attack. I don't know if they will be able to help, but they should be aware that the Klingons are going for the kill."

"Aye, Captain," Uhura said as she swung around to her console.

Kirk looked briefly at Spock again, and as always, received the silent support he needed. He turned his attention to Chekov. "Make sure every shot counts, Mr. Chekov. They won't give us a second chance."

"Weapons ready, sir," Chekov said, his voice trembling with tension and emotion. If the Klingons were planning on taking Kirk out, they were going to have to go through him first!

McCoy had moved to the side of Kirk's command chair. "No doubt there is a high ranking officer on that flagship," he said quietly.

Kirk nodded. "It can't be helped, Bones. I'm already on the top of their list, so I doubt if anything we do here can make matters any worse than they already are." He glanced up at McCoy and a tiny smile showed at the corners of his mouth. "I know," he said quietly, and McCoy knew Kirk was acknowledging the Doctor's fears, and perhaps his own.

"Captain," Uhura broke in, "I have apprised both the Hood and Republic about our circumstances and they've sent their best wishes for success. They have their hands full over there with the other two Klingon ships at the moment...." She hesitated, then went on. "I gave them our thanks. I hope that was the right thing to do."

"It was, Commander, thank you." Kirk said. "Okay, everybody, grab hold of something. It's going to be us or them!"

Sulu waited until the Klingon flagship fired their first salvo. He whirled the huge starship to port and went to warp seven, then instantly reversed engines and spun around so that they were at the flagship's stern. Two photon torpedoes fled the Enterprise and scored direct hits. Instantly the starship changed course, but not quickly enough to escape a punishing phaser barrage.

Kirk winced as he was slammed against the armrest of the command chair, but he recovered in time to help Sulu with the next attack run. "Phasers this time, Chekov, and aim for her engineering section and the nacelles."

"Aye, sir," Chekov said.

The Enterprise spun around again and closed on the flagship which was doing some very quick maneuvering of its own. Chekov's weapons missed both targets and the Enterprise was rocked violently by torpedo hits as the Klingon ship fled past their port bow.

"Uhura, get me damage reports as soon as possible," Kirk ordered.

"Aye, sir," Uhura said, throwing a quick troubled glance at Kirk before she turned to the communications console. She had rarely seen him look so pale and briefly wondered if it was something more than the tension of the moment that was causing it.

"Shields weakened but holding, Captain," Scott reported from his station, then he rose to his feet. "Permission to go to the engine room, sir. I dinna have many men down there, and I'd like to be with them, just in case."

"Permission granted, Scotty," Kirk said without looking at the Engineer. The Klingon flagship was coming around again and he was going to meet her with all batteries brought to bear. "Phasers and torpedoes this time, Chekov. Mr. Sulu, I want a heading that will take us straight through her."

Sulu turned to look at Kirk. "Through her, sir?"

Kirk nodded. "They want us dead, and unless we're willing to do the same, their ship is quick enough and capable enough to destroy us." He looked straight at Sulu. "Dead ahead, Mister, warp six."

The silence was deafening as the two large battlecruisers flew on their collision course. "Start firing as soon as we come in range, Chekov." Kirk's voice echoed around the hushed bridge. "Wherever she goes, Mr. Sulu, you follow at intercept speed." Kirk found he was holding on very tightly to the sides of the command chair. "Let's see how much stomach this commander has when it comes to the matter of his own death."

A sound came from beside his chair and Kirk looked up to see Spock standing there. Kirk raised a questioning eyebrow. "This is not an accepted battle maneuver," Spock said quietly.

"Agreed," Kirk answered, his eyes going back to the viewscreen.

"It could be interpreted as a form of suicide," Spock went on in a voice only Kirk could hear. "That could be grounds for removing a captain from his command."

Kirk swung the chair around and stared at Spock. "Is that a warning, Commander?" he asked.

Spock shook his head. "I am merely quoting the Starfleet manual as I remember it." He hesitated for a moment, then his eyes met Kirk's. "As I recall, you rarely followed the manual."

Kirk smiled at the confusion on Spock's face. "I'll explain it all later, Commander... if there is a later," he added as he swung his chair back to face the viewscreen. "All right, Mr. Chekov, phasers on full and don't let up until you receive my order. Mr. Sulu, maintain course unless our friend out there deviates from his, then follow and close in."

"Aye, sir," came the simultaneous answers.

The Enterprise shuddered from the force of the weapons barrage leaving her. Within seconds the Klingon flagship responded by starting its own continuous firing. Both ships rocked and shuddered from the onslaught but neither broke off their course. The remaining distance between them quickly lessened while the tension mounted. Neither commander was willing to blink.

"I never did like playing chicken," McCoy muttered under his breath as he increased his strangle hold on the bridge railing.

Sparks were beginning to fly from instruments all around the bridge as the hostile fire intensified. The Enterprise shuddered and groaned from the tremendous destructive energy the shields were trying to absorb, and were not being entirely successful.

The Klingon ship was so close that they could make out her shape, and she was not backing off. "Captain.... " Spock's voice broke into the silence, "if our torpedoes explode with the Klingon ship at such close range, they will damage the Enterprise as well."

"A chance we'll have to take," Kirk said grimly as he watched the viewscreen. "Only one of us is likely to come out of this, and we can't take the chance that it might be them."

At the last second, the Klingon flagship pulled hard to port, but not in time to miss the deadly photon fire. She lurched as the torpedoes hit and was thrown sideways, just grazing the Enterprise as she was hurled overhead, both her nacelles badly damaged.

"Sulu, hard about!" Kirk yelled. "Their shielding's gone.... "

"When the matter and antimatter in the damaged nacelles touch, their ship will explode," Spock said in an absurdly calm voice.

His words were hardly out when the Enterprise was blasted by a huge explosion. Sulu fought to control the helm but it was no use. The ship was flung out of control and went spinning madly through space. Everyone was sent flying, unable to grab hold of anything stationary long enough to break their fall. The ship continued her wild flight with no one able to seize the helm and regain control.

Kirk could not stop the groan of pain as he was slammed up against the steps on the far side of the bridge. He could see crewmembers desperately trying to get back to their positions. Suddenly another wrenching turn flung him back across the bridge where he ended up on the floor under the helm controls. He saw Spock struggling to also reach the helm position, but being unable to make any progress against the buffeting of the whirling ship.

Kirk anchored his legs around the helm's chair as best he could, then reached up with one hand, holding onto the bottom of the console with the other. He groped for the controls while he frantically tried to remember the setup of this new helm. After a few seconds he realized he was getting nowhere fast.

"Captain... " Sulu's voice sounded from across the bridge. "Move your hand to the right... good, now up about three inches... a little more... that's it. Now press down hard!"

Kirk pressed with all his remaining strength, which was little enough considering the angle his hand was in at the moment. For impossible seconds, nothing happened, then the sound of engines being thrown into reverse at high warp speed sounded in their ears.

Sulu's voice sounded through the cheers. "Now, move back down about five inches and then left... that's it. That should take us into sublight speed.... "

Gradually the ship started to slow down and stop its wild gyrations. Slowly people began to get to their feet, but not yet daring to let go of whatever they had found to hold

onto. Kirk let his hand drop and lay exhausted under the helm. He just needed a minute....

"Jim?" McCoy's worried voice sounded beside him.

"I'm all right, Bones," Kirk said, forcing himself to sit up. "Just taking a quick breather."

McCoy ran his hands over Kirk, checking for broken bones. "Are you sure you're all right?" he asked.

Kirk looked up at him. "You probably know better than I do, Doctor," he said. "Can I get up?"

McCoy stepped back. "No time like the present to find out."

Kirk gingerly got to his feet. Every bone in his body ached and he knew he probably had bruises on top of bruises, but so did everyone else. He stepped aside for Sulu to regain his helm. "Remind me to commend you for whatever it is they give heroes, Mr. Sulu," he said with a smile. "I couldn't have found those controls without your help."

"I don't think I could have done anything from down there," Sulu replied with a grin, "but from my vantage point being hung over the bridge railing, I could see just fine." He rubbed his stomach. "It's going to be quite a bruise," he added.

"Is everybody else all right?" Kirk asked. "What happened to the Klingon flagship?"

Spock looked up from his scanner. "She has disintegrated, Captain. With her nacelles badly damaged, it was only a matter of seconds before the matter and antimatter met and exploded. It is obvious that the Klingons did not design their vessels to allow the nacelles to be blown away from the main body of the ship when they became damaged."

Kirk shook his head. "We're lucky we weren't destroyed along with them," he said quietly, then he looked over at Uhura. "Damage report, Commander, and find out what's going on with the other starships."

As Uhura was activating her console, Kirk turned to the others. "Sulu, do we still have power?"

"Aye, sir. She's a little sluggish, but she'll steer."

"Weapons, Chekov?"

"Yes, sir."

Kirk nodded, then he moved over and sat in the command chair. "As long as we've got power and shields, we'd better be ready to go and help the others." His expression turned serious. "It's our lives or the Klingons', gentlemen. We've already seen that they are ready to die. I don't think the Hood or Republic were expecting that, and they might be in over their heads." He hit ship-wide communications again. "This is the Captain. You all performed bravely and it will be put into your records. However, the fight is not

over yet. There are two other Federation ships out there fighting for their lives, and we are going in to help. Just a little while longer, gentlemen, then we'll be heading home. Kirk out." He drew in a deep breath and tried to ignore the pain that was searing through his body. He waited a few seconds, then contacted engineering. "Kirk to Scott."

"Scotty here, sir."

"Everything all right down there?"

"Oh, aye, sir. You gave my bairns a wee roughing up, but they're none the worse for it."

"Good," Kirk said with a smile. "We're going to go at it one more time, Mr. Scott. Let me know if things get hot down there."

"Ach, Captain, there's nothing you can ask of my engines that they can't deal with. You needna worry about us."

"That's good to hear, Mr. Scott. Captain out." Kirk leaned back in his chair and looked around. "Well, is everybody ready?"

Nods came from around the bridge. "Captain, there are damage reports coming in from all over the ship," Uhura said, "but nothing critical at the moment."

Kirk nodded. "Thank you, Commander." He looked over at Sulu. "Ahead full, Mr. Sulu. The cavalry are about to come over the hill." He grinned at Spock's puzzled expression, then turned his attention back to the viewscreen and the upcoming battle.



The fight being waged by the other ships was a vicious one. The Republic and Hood had prevented the other two Klingon ships from approaching the Enterprise, but had sustained a lot of damage in doing so. Sharpe and Dnuelle knew that the Klingons' objective was probably to take Kirk any way that they could, but neither of them had realized that it was death that the Klingons were aiming for, or they probably would have brought their fight down more quickly to the level the Klingons were willing to go.

"Take the flank, Mr. Sulu," Kirk ordered as the Enterprise swooped past the fierce battle that was being waged by two mortal enemies. He glanced at Chekov. "Fire as ordered, Commander," he said quietly.

"Aye, sir. Weapons ready." Everyone on the bridge looked at each other, knowing that again the decision had been made. Only death would bring them out of this battle. Once again their lives were on the line.

"Steady as she goes, Sulu," Kirk went on quietly, not knowing that his voice was giving the others a feeling of strength. Kirk would bring them through as he had so often before. "Evasive action when you feel it is needed. The others are using the Blooto score.... "

"Understood, Captain," Sulu answered in a firm voice.

Kirk leaned back in his seat, suddenly feeling more confident of the outcome. He had an experienced crew who knew how to survive. His attention went to the screen as a

Klingon ship appeared in front of him. She must be disabled or destroyed. "All right, everybody," he said, "let's get this over with!"

The three Federation starships worked like well oiled-machines. Each commanding officer was experienced and competent, each understanding what the pattern was of the battle they were conducting. Never once did they get in each other's way, never once did one of them have to come to the rescue of the other, leaving themselves exposed to the enemy. Tension ran high on all bridges, but the Klingons, having lost their flagship and commanding general, were no match for them. Eventually, the enemy ships were both destroyed.

"Captain Dnuelle on screen, sir," Uhura said to Kirk as the Enterprise slowly came to a halt with engines on standby to give them a rest while Scott checked them out.

"On screen, Commander."

"Nice work, Jim," Jake Dnuelle said as his image appeared on the screen. "That new ship of yours must have answered some of your questions."

Kirk suddenly realized that he had not even once wondered if the ship would be up to what they had just asked of her. She was the Enterprise, and he had just assumed that she would come through as she always had. And she had, just as her predecessor had done so many times before.

Dnuelle did not seem to expect an answer. "What did you do with Styles?" he asked. "I thought I saw the Excelsior here a few minutes ago."

"She was," Kirk said grimly. "I sent him home." He looked at the screen for a minute. "Jake," he said suddenly, "I'd bet a month's pay that those were the only ships the Klingons sent after me, but I'd like to be absolutely sure.... "

"So you want someone to patrol between here and their territory, just to be certain," Dnuelle finished for him.

Kirk nodded. "I'd appreciate it. There's something I have to do here first, or I'd go myself."

"Now hold on," Dnuelle said. "Caflisch sent us out here to find you and bring you home. I doubt if he'd appreciate it if we let you go off again looking for trouble. I'll contact Sharpe and send him. The Republic's a heck of a lot faster than this ship and can cover a lot more territory. Me, I'll just mosey along side of you and make sure you get home all right."

"That really isn't necessary," Kirk started to protest.

"Sure it is. We both happen to have to answer to Bob Caflisch and I, for one, do not like it when he's mad at me, and if I lose you, I guarantee he'll be a lot more than mad. So humor an old friend, will you? I promise to stay out of the way."

Kirk grinned. "All right, consider yourself humored."

"Thank you," Dnuelle replied with a laconic smile. "Now, can I ask what it is you're planning on doing?"

"Styles fired on that bird of prey out there after she had dropped her shields," Kirk started.

"The fool!" Dnuelle said, shaking his head.

Kirk's smile faded. "I guess we couldn't have expected anything different. I'm going back to see if there's anything I can do."

"Be careful, Jim. It's obvious the Klingons aren't your biggest fans."

"I know," Kirk said, "but it can't be helped. I won't leave a defenseless ship out here alone in space, especially if there are injured people aboard."

"Okay," Dnuelle said. "I'll send the Republic along about her business and will wait for you here. Give me a toot when you're ready to leave."

"Thanks, Jake," Kirk replied. "I appreciate all the help."

"Anytime," Dnuelle said. "Hood out."

Kirk sat motionless in the command chair for a few minutes, looking out at the never ending star pattern. "Uh, Captain," Sulu's hesitant voice broke into Kirk's thoughts. "Do you want me to take the engines off standby?"

Kirk's eyes cleared as his attention came back from where he had been lost in thought. "Yes, Mr. Sulu, take us back to the bird of prey." He got up. "Uhura, keep working on those damage reports."

"Aye, sir."

"Spock, lock onto the bird of prey and run some sensor scans. See if you can find any trace of life on her."

"Acknowledged."

McCoy came to stand beside Kirk. "Klaa would not have come back for you," he said quietly.

"Yes, he would, Doctor, if only to make sure that I was dead." Kirk looked at McCoy. "Are you saying we should leave them out there?"

McCoy shook his head. "No, just pointing out the dangers."

"Captain," Spock's voice came from the science station. "There are life signs on the bird of prey -- and very high radiation readings. Their engines must have been severely damaged by the Excelsior's phasers."

Kirk turned to Uhura. "Have you been able to contact anyone over there?" he asked.

Uhura shook her head. "No, sir. There has been no contact since we started to leave the barrier."

Kirk turned back to the viewscreen and stood gazing out at the crippled ship that now filled the screen. "Mr. Sulu, bring us as close to the bird of prey as you can. Spock, you and I are beaming aboard, along with Dr. McCoy.... "

"Jim," McCoy caught Kirk's arm. "It could be a trap. Surely it would be better if security beamed over first."

Kirk gave a grim smile. "There are no security people on board who have enough experience to take on a Klingon ship, Doctor." He looked over at Uhura. "Contact Lt. Noren and have him meet us in the transporter room with phasers for everyone." Just as Kirk finished speaking, the turbolift doors opened and Scott stepped out. "Scotty, you'll be in charge here," Kirk continued. "Everyone know their jobs? Good." He started for the turbolift. "All right, gentlemen, let's go." When he saw McCoy hesitate, he stopped. "A man over there tried to help me, Doctor. I can't just turn my back on him."

McCoy returned Kirk's look, knowing as did his captain that Koord might already be dead, but he did not say anything.

Kirk nodded his understanding. "We'll never know unless we look, will we, Bones?" he said quietly. He smiled at McCoy's expression, then turned and made his way to the turbolift with Spock following on his heels. After another moment's hesitation, McCoy followed.



They materialized into a twisted mass of metal. The bird of prey had taken a direct hit with shields down and there had been no protection from the Excelsior's deadly phaser fire. "Let's try the bridge," Kirk suggested as they looked around at the heavily damaged area.

As they clambered their way forward, Lt. Noren was impressed that the others seemed to know the ship so intimately. Doors were jammed, but a combination of phasers and Spock's Vulcan strength kept them going until they reached the bridge itself.

Klaa was standing alone in the midst of the wreckage as though he was carved out of stone. Kirk stopped just inside the doorway and looked around. It was impossible to recognize this place as the bridge on which he had stood only short hours before. The crew appeared to be dead -- Koord, Vixis -- the others who had been at the reception on the Enterprise. He finally looked back at Klaa in silence.

Klaa stared at him for a long time without speaking. "Koord said you were honorable, not like other humans he had dealt with," he said eventually. "I did not believe him, but he was wiser than I, so I acceded to his wishes."

Bullshit! McCoy thought.

"What happened to your communications?" Kirk asked.

"All our systems were damaged by the barrier's force field," Klaa replied. "We were virtually crippled when we finally made it through -- we had power for only one attacking pass. After that when all systems failed, Koord said that by dropping shields you would understand our intentions."

"Your Empire had sent a battle complement against us," Spock observed. "Are you saying that General Koord was willing not to join with them?"

"We couldn't have joined even if he had allowed it," Klaa said bitterly. "After our first attack, nothing would work outside of impulse power. Koord said it was not our fight as we had received no orders directly from the Empire, and that was my fault since I had not informed them of my original intentions.... " He looked at Kirk. "I should have known better than to believe a foolish old man. If I had done as I should have when I first encountered you, it would be you who would now be dead, not my crew!"

"Klaa, we did not fire on you," Kirk said.

Klaa stared at Kirk with disbelief written on his face. "Just before our screen went blank from the overload, yours was the only ship visible. You were the only ship who could have turned and fired so quickly on our position. Do not put the blame on another, Kirk. I know who it was I was facing."

Kirk opened his mouth to protest again, then shut it. Klaa was looking at him through eyes of hate. It would do no good to protest, he would not be believed. He looked around. "Is everyone accounted for?" he asked.

Klaa laughed harshly. "Is everyone else dead, you mean? Yes, Captain, you do not have to watch your back. They are all dead, and you are victorious."

"No one won this battle," Kirk said, suddenly weary and sickened by the whole incident. "We will beam you back to the Enterprise, Captain.... "

"I would prefer to stay with my ship," Klaa said stubbornly, "unless I am being taken prisoner."

Kirk shook his head. "You are not a prisoner, but there is radiation building up very quickly from the damaged engines. You would not survive long enough to be rescued by your people."

"Has it occurred to you that I would prefer to die here?" Klaa asked.

Kirk's eyes held the Klingon's steadily. "Yes, it has occurred to me," he said quietly, "but I'm afraid I cannot allow it. I owe Koord that much."

"If you allow me to live, you will have an enemy for life, Kirk," Klaa said with a quiet threat, "and I promise you that there will never again be someone like Koord to sway me."

Kirk stared at him for a long time without speaking, then he took a deep breath. "I, too, have reasons for disliking your people, Klaa, so I understand you. It is something that I will have to live with, because I am not going to allow you to stay here and die." He looked over at Lt. Noren. "You will escort our guest back to the Enterprise, Lieutenant."

"To the brig, sir?" Noren hesitated. "It's pretty full at the moment."

Kirk smiled briefly. "Forward observation lounge for now," he said. "I'll arrange quarters when I return to the ship."



Noren nodded and motioned Klaa to move over in front of him. As the Klingon passed Kirk, he paused. "Enemies for life, Captain, and a Klingon lives long."

"Understood," Kirk said quietly.

"Charming person," McCoy observed, watching as the transporter sparkle took Noren and Klaa back to the Enterprise.

"Doctor, run a scan," Kirk said quickly. "Spock mentioned life signs when he first scanned this ship. Is anyone else alive?"

McCoy hurriedly got out his tricorder, silently cursing that he had not done it before. "Yes there are, Captain," he said after a moment's pause. "Here on the bridge.... " He quickly moved to the far side of the bridge away from where they had been standing. "Spock, I'll need your help." The Vulcan moved to McCoy's side and helped pull twisted metal off the two bodies that were lying there.

"Koord!" Kirk whispered softly, then he quickly made his way to the general's side. "Bones, is he.... "

"He is." Koord's hoarse whisper only just reached their ears. "And I am getting very... very tired of Klaa... calling me a fool. I knew you would... would come... " A groan of pain cut off the rest of Koord's comment.

"Lie still, General," McCoy said gruffly. He pulled out a hypo and pressed it against the Klingon's shoulder. "For shock," he explained briefly.

"Spock," Kirk said urgently, "is there anyone else?"

Spock borrowed McCoy's tricorder and quickly scanned a full circle. "Nothing registers, Captain. If anyone else was alive, they are no longer." He looked at Kirk. "I would advise leaving this ship immediately. The radiation levels are growing dangerously high."

Kirk nodded. "Bones, can Koord be moved?"

"It's no more of a risk than leaving him here," McCoy said. He flipped open his communicator. "McCoy to Scott.... " He suddenly hesitated, then looked at Kirk. "Oops, sorry, Captain.... "

"Go ahead," Kirk said, "there's no time to stand on formality."

McCoy nodded. "Scotty, lock on and beam four. Have an emergency medical team in the transporter room as soon as possible.... "

Kirk reached over and took the communicator from McCoy. "This is the Captain, Mr. Scott. I want phasers locked on this ship and as soon as we are back on board the Enterprise, you are to be ready to destroy it. Understood?"

"Aye, Captain, as soon as I get the word."

"All right, Mr. Scott, energize when ready." Kirk closed the communicator and handed it back to McCoy as the transporter beam reached out and took them.

The medical team arrived just as they were materializing on the transporter pad. The team transferred Koord onto the gurney and were out the door heading back for the sickbay before Kirk had a chance to move. "I'll let you know as soon as I know something, Jim," McCoy said to Kirk's unspoken question, then he, too, was gone.

"Come on, Spock, we'd better get to the bridge and see how Scotty's getting along," Kirk said, glancing over at the Vulcan.

Spock nodded agreement. "You do have to destroy the bird of prey, Captain."

"I know," Kirk answered. "It's just that Klaa has lost so much." He shook his head, then the two of them headed out the door and down the corridor.

"You are feeling sorry for Klaa?" Spock asked as they stepped into the turbolift.

Kirk gave the order for the bridge, then he gingerly leaned back against the wall and looked at Spock. "I guess I'm assigning him feelings that he probably doesn't have." He looked down for a moment. "I was remembering how I felt when I gave the Enterprise her destruct orders, how I felt as I ran through her corridors knowing that I had just pronounced her death sentence... "

"Ships are inanimate objects, Captain," Spock offered. "They are not capable of dying."

Kirk shook his head. "Don't kid yourself, Spock. They have a life, and they cling to that life with the same tenacity that we do... and some of them die as hard." He shuddered as he remembered watching the bright stream of fire that was his lady as she dove screaming to her death through the atmosphere of the Genesis planet. He knew it was something that he would never forget, no matter how long he lived. No one could ever tell him that she had no life -- no soul. She would not have cried if that had been true.

Spock gazed at Kirk. The Captain was talking in abstract terms that he did not understand, but he realized that to Kirk, the Enterprise had been as real and alive as any one of his crew. It was a concept he would have to ponder. At the moment it made no sense to him.

The turbolift doors opened to show the bird of prey still hanging immobile in space. Scotty turned from where he had been standing beside the command chair. "Coordinates have been fed into the computer, Captain. The phasers are waiting for your command."

Kirk stopped on the platform which ran around the bridge, and stood looking out at the silent ship. "Uhura," he said, "contact the forward observation lounge. Inquire if Captain Klaa would like to witness this."

"Captain," Spock was at Kirk's elbow, "do you think it wise?"

Kirk shook his head. "No, I don't, but he must be given the choice." He looked at Spock. "He cannot hate me any more than he does now, and he must be given the opportunity to see her to her death if he wishes."

Uhura's voice sounded in the background, then she turned to Kirk. "Lt. Noren says that Captain Klaa has no wish to see the Federation display its petty victory further, Captain."

"Tough words from an angry man," Kirk said softly.

"He would do no less, Captain," Spock replied, "and it would not be for the reasons that you are doing it."

"No, I guess not," Kirk agreed. He moved down to the command chair. "Mr. Chekov, on my order."

"Ready, sir."

Kirk slowly sat down looking out at the helpless ship, then he shook his head. "Fire," he ordered in a firm voice. Phaser fire fled the ship, and the viewscreen was filled with the fiery energy from the exploding bird of prey. For a long time no one spoke, then Kirk slid back from the edge of the chair where he had been sitting. "Mr. Sulu, plot a course back to Earth."

"Aye, sir."

"Uhura, inform the Hood of our intentions. Mr. Chekov, take over on scanners. I think the Klingons have been discouraged for the time being, but I don't want anyone sneaking up on us."

"Aye, Captain," Chekov said as he got up and headed for the science station.

Spock moved away from the instruments he had just surrendered to Chekov and stood at attention, his hands behind his back. Kirk slowly got out of the command chair. "Mr. Scott, you have the con," he said as he turned and his eyes met the Vulcan's. "Mr. Spock and I are going down to sickbay for few minutes."

"Aye, Captain," Scotty said.

The turbolift doors closed behind them as Kirk slumped back against the wall. "Well, it's over," he said wearily. "Hostages rescued and accounted for. The Klingons discouraged for the moment...." He ran his hands over his face. "God, I'm tired."

Spock looked at him, worry evident in his eyes. "Perhaps it is time to do as Dr. McCoy requested," he suggested.

"What was that?" Kirk asked as he dropped his hands to his sides.

"That you remain in sickbay and allow yourself time to heal. You admitted that you were not well...." Spock hesitated, then continued. "I have rarely heard you acknowledge that you have been hurt."

Kirk glanced over at the Vulcan. "Old age," he said briefly as the turbolift came to a halt and the doors opened.

Hardly, Spock thought as Kirk walked out of the turbolift. Kirk was obviously going to avoid the subject. Showing weakness of any kind was always difficult for

Kirk -- to admit it even harder. Spock realized that this was a time that Kirk should talk about it, but he had no idea how to broach the subject.

Sickbay was almost deserted when they arrived. "Where's Dr. McCoy?" Kirk asked one of the medics who was running inventory on the drug supply.

"He's still in surgery, Captain," the young man said, snapping to attention.

What the hell's going on around here with all these salutes? Kirk wondered. He looked around and saw Lt. Noren standing by the door leading into the surgery. "Ah, Lt. Noren, where's Klaa?"

Lt. Noren, like the medic, snapped to attention. "He is still in the forward observation lounge, sir, but he is becoming increasingly hostile. I left two of my men watching him and came here to ask Dr. McCoy if I could release our people from the brig with the idea of perhaps putting Klaa there."

Kirk looked at Noren in silence, knowing that he was probably correct in his assessment of the situation, but loathe to imprison the Klingon simply because it was what Klaa was expecting. "Our people should come out of there," he agreed finally. He looked at Spock. "See if you can find their medical records, and get a mediscanner. We'll go check those people out ourselves, seeing as how McCoy's tied up at the moment."

Spock went into McCoy's office and soon came out with the required equipment. "What shall we do if anyone shows signs of increased psionic abilities?" he asked Kirk as they walked down the corridor.

Kirk looked over at him. "You mean silver eyes?" He was silent for a few moments. "I honestly don't know," he said finally.

Lt. Noren looked from one man to the other. "Silver eyes?" he echoed. "I don't understand."

"I hope you never have reason to," Kirk said in a voice full of feeling. "Come on, let's get this over with."

The eleven crewmembers were sitting quietly in the brig, but all rose to their feet when Kirk arrived. Kirk hesitated for a moment, then shut off the force field. "I would appreciate it if everyone would remain patient just a few minutes longer while you are checked out by Mr. Spock," he said.

There was a low murmur of assent. Spock quickly ran the tricorder over each person while Kirk stood off to one side, alert to the body language of each person, looking for the stiff-limbed movement that had been exhibited by both Gary Mitchell and Dr. Elizabeth Dehner. No one showed any such sign, nor was there any evidence of the glowing silver eyes.

Spock finished his examination. "No one appears to be in the perfect health that Lt. Commander Mitchell was, Captain," he said, turning to Kirk. "I believe the new alloy that the brig is constructed of has accomplished what its inventors intended. Not only can no one get out, it would appear that nothing unwanted can get in."

Kirk glanced down the corridor at the twin of this brig still showing a huge gaping hole in its rear wall. "Well, not most things, anyway," he said. He looked back at the

crewmembers who were still looking anxiously at him. "Gentlemen," he said, "please believe that it was for your own safety that you had to endure this incarceration. However brief it was, I know it could not have been pleasant. Be assured that your cooperation will be noted in your records, however unusual that entry might be," he added with a slight smile. "You are free to return to duty. Thank you very much," he added lamely, unable to think of anything else to say.

The eleven crewmembers filed past him and hurried off down the corridor. Lt. Noren watched them go, then he turned to Kirk. "Should I bring the Klingon down here, sir?"

Kirk looked at the brig for a moment, then shook his head. "No, Lieutenant, I'll go and speak with him first."

"Aye, sir," Noren said dubiously.

A grin crossed Kirk's face. "Don't worry," he said to Noren, "I've been dealing with Klingons since you were in your cradle. I'll be fine."

"He's pretty angry, sir," Noren warned him.

"I'm sure he is," Kirk answered. "I promise I'll be careful." He turned to Spock. "Go back to sickbay and tell McCoy what we've done. I want word on Koord's condition as soon as possible."

Spock nodded. He also looked troubled with Kirk's decision to talk with Klaa, but he would not say anything while Lt. Noren was standing there. "Yes, sir," he said quietly.

Kirk and Noren made their way to the forward observation lounge. Kirk appeared to be lost in thought, so Noren said nothing to distract him. He stopped at the outer door. "Do you wish me to come in with you, sir?"

Kirk shook his head. "No, Lieutenant. I'll call if I need anything."

"Aye, sir," Noren said, and took up station with the two men who were already guarding the door.

Kirk took a deep breath and walked into the room. He was momentarily caught up by the beauty of the place. It was a masculine retreat, and he knew it had been expressly designed for him to acknowledge his love of the sea and the vessels which had once plied the oceans of his home planet. It even smelled good -- the mahogany and oak blending together to produce a reminder of an Earth of times past -- not like the modern technology that was to be found throughout the rest of this new Enterprise.

"Gloating, Kirk?" came a sarcastic voice from the other side of the room, startling Kirk out of his reverie.

Kirk looked over to see Klaa sitting in the corner, his back to the star pattern on the viewscreen. "I came to see if you were comfortable, Captain," he replied.

Klaa shook his head. "You came because your guards were complaining that I was causing too much trouble." He got to his feet. "I plan to continue causing trouble, Kirk, so you'd better get used to it."

Kirk looked at him for a few minutes, but Klaa did not drop his gaze. "As you wish," Kirk said finally. "I had hoped that you could be treated as a guest.... "

Klaa laughed harshly. "You deliberately destroy my ship and you expect me to be grateful that you rescued me? Hardly, Kirk."

"You are trying to force me to have you put into the brig, aren't you?" Kirk asked.

Klaa shrugged. "It is where you want me anyway, Kirk. You do not fool me by putting me in such luxurious surroundings -- luxuries that only a weakling race such as yours would require. You would not find such on a Klingon ship."

Only a bad smell, Kirk thought with a smile, remembering McCoy's comment back on Vulcan about their captured bird of prey.

"Does my comment amuse you, Captain?" Klaa asked suspiciously.

Kirk shook his head. "No, Captain, just a fond memory from another time and place." He looked at Klaa. "You will not be granted your wish to be placed in the brig unless it becomes absolutely necessary, and you will find that I can be a very tolerant man. You will, however, be escorted to a guest cabin which can be filled with breakable objects, if you so wish. You can spend the rest of the journey back to Earth methodically destroying them if it will serve to keep you amused. Let my security people know what sort of food and beverage you would like and they will have it brought to you." He turned to leave.

"Kirk!" Klaa's voice caused Kirk to stop but he did not turn around. "I will kill you one day."

Kirk nodded. "Join the list, Captain." He turned back to face the Klingon. "I have many enemies, and none have succeeded yet."

"None of them has been me."

Kirk's eyebrows lifted. "That is supposed to scare me?" he asked. "I have faced officers of the Empire before, and have met only two I have respected. Neither of those men is you, Captain," he added. He bowed his head and walked out, wondering why he had just deliberately provoked a very dangerous man. Did he still have a death wish he was unwilling to acknowledge? Maybe he would ask McCoy about it one day.



Kirk arrived on the bridge just as Uhura hit communications to summon him. "Oh, Captain, Admiral Caflisch is on the Starfleet channel."

"On screen, Commander," Kirk said as he made his way to the command chair.

"Jim!" Bob Caflisch's image appeared on the screen. "Where the hell have you been?"

Kirk grinned. "Following your orders, Admiral," he said. "We have the Nimbus Three representatives on board and are returning home."

Caflisch frowned. "I think there's a little more to it than that, Captain. I have had conflicting reports from Captain Styles and Captain Sharpe."

Kirk's smile broadened. "I would think that Vince Sharpe's version would be a little more accurate."

Caflisch glared at Kirk for a minute, then a smile started to tug at the corners of his mouth. "I contacted Dnuelle and Jake has backed Sharpe's story. He also said he was escorting you home." He stared at Kirk for a long moment. "You could have called in, you know," he said finally. "What the hell happened out there?"

Kirk sobered quickly. He did not know how much to tell Caflisch. Sybok had been Spock's brother, and he had not yet had a chance to find out just how his friend had been affected both by what Sybok had done, and by his death. "It was an unusual mission, Admiral," Kirk said eventually. "You will have my full report when we get back."

"You're evading the question, Kirk," Caflisch warned.

Kirk stared at him, then took the chance. "I promise I'll tell you everything, Bob, but at the moment even I don't know the whole story." He lifted his hands a little. "I'm afraid that answer will have to suffice until we see each other."

Caflisch remained silent for a moment, then shook his head. "I can't get you to open up, and I can't get Styles to shut up. All right, Jim, as long as you're not holding anything back that could affect Federation security.... "

"You know me better than that, Bob," Kirk said. "Don't worry, it's nothing that fantastic."

"Well, all right, but I want you here in my office as soon as the Enterprise docks."

"I'll be there," Kirk promised.

"Just see that you are. Caflisch out."

Kirk let out a deep sigh as the viewscreen went blank. One problem put off for a while. He got out of the command chair and turned around to see Spock standing there, his dark eyes fully on Kirk. "Been here long?" Kirk managed to say in a conversational voice.

"Long enough," Spock answered. "Dr. McCoy wishes to speak with you."

Kirk nodded. "Sulu, you've got the con."

"Aye, sir."

"Captain," Uhura stopped Kirk as he started past her, "you wanted the damage reports."

Kirk reached out and took them. His eyes narrowed as he read the amount of damage the Enterprise had sustained. "Looks like we'll be in space dock for a while sorting this out," he said quietly. He handed the list back to Uhura. "Relay this to Mr. Scott, would you?"

"Yes, sir."

Kirk smiled at her. "It looks like we might be getting a longer shore leave than we expected." He glanced over at Spock. "McCoy's waiting," he said simply.

Spock followed Kirk into the turbolift. "Sickbay," Kirk ordered, then he looked over at Spock. "I didn't know what to tell Caflisch," he said. "We need to talk."

Spock nodded. "Yes," he said quietly, sending a shiver through Kirk. Spock was rarely willing to talk about personal matters, but how much of that former life did he remember and, more importantly, how much did he remember of the emotion of that life?

The turbolift stopped and let them out just down the corridor from sickbay. They stepped out in silence, neither knowing what to say. The short walk was completed in silence and they entered sickbay together.

McCoy turned as he heard the door open. "Oh, good, Spock, you found him."

"I wasn't exactly hiding, Bones," Kirk protested mildly.

"I can never be sure," McCoy shot back. "Come on into my office." Kirk and Spock followed him in. "Sit down," McCoy said gruffly.

"How's Koord?" Kirk asked, easing himself into a chair.

"I'm not sure," McCoy answered as he sat down behind his desk. "He's still unconscious. I've never operated on a Klingon before. They're almost as difficult as Vulcans, and even with the computer to help me, I wasn't altogether sure what organs had been injured and which ones looked like that normally." He drew in a deep breath. "I did the best I could, but I'll be relieved to hand him over to medical services back on Earth." He looked at Kirk. "How long before we get there?"

"About sixteen hours," Kirk said. "Is he in any danger?"

McCoy shook his head. "Not immediate, as long as there aren't any complications." He looked at Kirk. "How about you?"

"I'm not planning on dying," Kirk said.

"I didn't mean that," McCoy protested. "I just wanted to know how you were feeling."

Kirk glanced over at Spock, a movement that did not go unnoticed by McCoy. Kirk did not want to get stuck in sickbay. Not yet. He needed to talk to Spock before they got back to Earth, and they did not have much time. He looked back at McCoy. "Better," he lied.

"Sure you are," McCoy said sarcastically. "Jim, I'd like you to be in one of those beds out there.... "

"Not just yet, Bones," Kirk pleaded. "I really don't feel much worse than I did earlier, and I doubt if we're going to be attacked by anyone between here and Earth. I promise not to do anything foolish.... "

"Staying out of bed is foolish enough at this point," McCoy said bluntly as he stared at Kirk. He knew how much Kirk hated to be confined to sickbay, but there was more than that here, only he did not know what it was. "Well," he said, relenting at the pleading look in Kirk's eyes, "at least let me check you out."

Kirk nodded, knowing he had just won a major battle and not daring to push McCoy further by refusing. "Okay, but you'll find I'm not putting you on."

"Let me be the judge of that," McCoy said as he got up.

Kirk endured a very painful probing from McCoy, steeling himself not to show any sign of pain as McCoy's experienced fingers probed injured areas. At last McCoy stepped back and looked at him. "You should be a Vulcan, Jim," he said.

Spock looked from one man to the other. "A Vulcan, Doctor? I do not understand."

McCoy looked at him. "I mean that our captain here is in a great deal of pain, Spock, but is refusing to acknowledge it." He got out a hypo. "I hope there is a good reason for this," he said as he pressed the hypo against Kirk's shoulder. "This is absolutely the last one you are getting. When this wears off, I want you back in sickbay and flat on your back." He sprayed the ugly burns on Kirk's chest and back again. "This should help for a while," he said as he put the bottle down, then he looked at Kirk. "You've got three hours, Jim. After that, you're back in here."

Kirk slid down from the table. "Thanks, Bones," he said.

Just then McCoy was interrupted by one of his technicians. "Dr. McCoy, that last suggestion you gave me worked. I've got a handle on the Captain's problem.... " The man stopped short when he saw Kirk and Spock standing there. "Uh, I'm... I didn't mean.... " He looked helplessly at McCoy. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't realize he was with you."

"Problem? What problem?" Spock asked suspiciously.

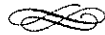
"Nothing more than our captain being a pig-headed wonder," McCoy said, but his eyes were on Kirk, waiting for some sort of reaction, and getting none. He shook his head. "Go on, you two, get out of here and let me work with someone who listens to what I say!" He saw Spock hesitate and knew Kirk would have his head if this conversation went any further. "Are you two leaving, or do you want me to change my mind and give General Koord a roommate?" That got the response McCoy expected as Kirk took hold of Spock's arm and literally pulled him out of sickbay. Stifling a grin, McCoy turned to the technician who was looking after the departing figures of his commanding officers with a puzzled expression. "What did you find?" McCoy demanded.

The man turned his attention back to McCoy. "It was your suggestion to break down the different radiations that were present, sir. There is one especially high gamma ray that is causing the problem."

McCoy nodded with satisfaction. "Nothing can send out a blast like that alien did without having some sort of radiation involved in its makeup." He looked at the technician. "Have you figured out a way to stop the effects?"

"I'm not sure," the technician said honestly. "I'd feel better if you'd come take a look."

"You couldn't talk me out of it, Lieutenant," McCoy said with a happy smile. "We're going to cure the Captain of this tub if it kills both of us in the trying!"



As Kirk and Spock escaped from the sickbay, Kirk felt a momentary pang of guilt. McCoy knew something was going on, but was willing for Kirk to fill him in, not involving himself in something that might not include him -- something that he, Kirk, had not been able to do earlier. This does include you, Bones, Kirk thought, but I don't know if Spock is ready to open up, and it's not fair to ask him to face more than one of us at a time, not until I know for sure how he feels.

They paused at the turbolift and Spock turned to look at Kirk. "You are holding something back," he said bluntly.

Kirk met his look steadily. "I'm not hiding anything, Spock. I think for once I've been more than honest about how I feel. I feel lousy, okay?"

"You should be in sickbay," Spock said stubbornly.

Kirk smiled a little. "Do you honestly think Bones would let me out of there if he really felt I was in trouble?" he asked. "Look, Spock, I'm hurting. I admit it. But standing up out here or lying down in there won't make a tremendous difference in my condition, and given the choice, I'd rather be out here. Does that satisfy you?"

Spock hesitated. He knew Kirk was right in saying that there was no way McCoy would let him leave sickbay if he thought Kirk's condition was that serious, yet he had more than once suggested that perhaps it would be better if Kirk stayed. However, there was a great deal of difference in the definition of 'must' and 'should.' Taken literally, it was probably all right for Kirk still to be on his feet.

Kirk's smile widened as he watched Spock's changing expression and he knew he had won the argument. He looked at the turbolift for a moment, then drew in a deep breath. "We don't need to go to the bridge. Sulu can take us home without help."

"Agreed," Spock said solemnly. He felt his stomach twist into a tight knot, and again wondered at the sensation. Why would his stomach have such a reaction when he knew Kirk was not in immediate danger?

Kirk stood lost in thought for a moment, then he looked at Spock. "No one will be in the forward observation lounge.... "

"Captain Klaa is no longer there?"

"He's under house arrest," Kirk answered with a grin. "I have a feeling that Starfleet will be billing the Klingon Empire for damages rendered." His grin widened at Spock's confused expression. "Never mind, it's enough that he's out of our way for a while. Come on, let's go."

They rode up in the turbolift in silence. Spock followed his captain into the richly decorated lounge, pausing to watch Kirk as he stood and savored his surroundings. "I

seem to remember that we would always end up in the herbarium at times like this," he said eventually.

Kirk turned to look at him, understanding by what Spock had just said that the Vulcan knew why they were there. "It's funny," he said finally, "I don't even know if there is a herbarium on this ship."

"There is," Spock answered dryly, "along with a state-of-the-art holographic illusion room."

Kirk looked at Spock steadily. "Is that where you'd rather be, Spock, living an illusion rather than dealing with reality?"

Spock shook his head. "Vulcans do not believe in illusion, Captain, only facts based on truth."

Kirk nodded, holding the Vulcan's gaze a moment longer, then he turned and walked over to the viewscreen where the distant stars shone like pin point dots of light passing the fast moving ship. "Facts based on truth," he repeated softly. "I guess most of us have been hit pretty hard by that concept over the past few hours." He glanced at Spock's image reflected in the viewscreen. "Sybok's death is a truth." He turned around and looked at Spock.

The Vulcan nodded. "I now understand how you felt those many years ago on Deneva, and I am grieving for not being able to help you then in the way you needed."

"You are grieving for a hurt that has long since healed, Spock," Kirk said finally. "You should be grieving for Sybok and for the hurt you have suffered."

Spock shook his head. "Death is a logical ending of life, Captain. One does not mourn logic."

Kirk walked over to one of the large chairs and sat down. Even with all of McCoy's medication, his body still ached badly. "Sybok tore a very painful memory from you, Spock," he said as he sat down, "and he exposed that pain in front of us. Surely that must have caused some hurt."

Spock sat down on a bench facing Kirk. He was silent for a time trying to figure out what to say, then he finally looked up at Kirk who was studying him with concerned eyes. "All Sybok did was to escalate the return of emotions that I already had, but had lost since the fal tor pan. Since that time I have been existing in a vacuum, remembering most things from my life before Genesis, but with no emotion, no feeling. I remembered people and places, understanding that they were important to me, but there was no feeling, no emotion, nothing.... " He paused, then drew in a deep breath. "Ever since I underwent the fal tor pan, those emotions have been gradually returning.... " He faltered again.

"Spock, you don't need to talk about this if you find it's too painful," Kirk said.

Spock shook his head. "No, I need to talk about it, to try to understand why events cause such unexpected reactions." He looked up at Kirk again. "Back on Vulcan, I knew who you were, but I did not know you. I returned with you because my mother said I belonged with you, not because I felt I must be by your side." His eyes dropped, and he twisted his fingers together, unable to look at Kirk as he dragged out memories and

emotions he had never dared to fully examine. "It wasn't until you accused me of being half-Human, it wasn't until you finally lost your temper with me that I started to remember what you were in my life. I immediately remembered another, younger captain who had reached out to me in the only way he knew -- and how much it had hurt before I discovered your reason for striking out.... "

"Exo III," Kirk said softly. "That was an android talking, Spock, not me."

Spock nodded, but did not look up. "You reached me by inflicting pain, Captain, just as you used pain to reach me on the Klingon ship." He finally looked up. "Just as Sybok used pain to try to reach me, and showed me even more clearly than before that I did not belong in his world, or even in the Vulcan world." He shook his head, then his eyes met Kirk's. "He showed me again what I had once discovered by myself, but the memory had been taken from me." He drew in another deep breath. "I am my own man, Jim, but I belong to you in a way that I have never belonged to myself. You are the reason I am."

Kirk found that he was holding his breath. Spock had called him Jim for the very first time without prompting since his memory had been fully restored, and now he was saying things that he had never openly talked about before, and Kirk was afraid of breaking the spell.

Spock was again looking down at his hands. "Standing beside you in this room, facing Sybok with his face radiant with his dreams, I suddenly realized that was all they were -- dreams, not reality, and dreams do not come true except in fairy tales. When Sybok demanded that I go with him, all I could think of was that I had so foolishly run from you once before those many years ago, and if it had not been for T'Sai's wisdom, we might not be sitting here now.... "

"Sybok was your brother, Spock," Kirk said softly. "That must count for something."

Spock looked up again. "You lost a brother."

"Sam died a long time ago. I've had time to heal from that pain."

"As I have," Spock said earnestly. "The Sybok that I knew died many years ago back on Vulcan. He died for me the day that he was banished."

"But to suddenly come across him like this," Kirk started.

Spock nodded. "Yes, it was a surprise, and he brought out emotions that were long dormant, but I did not see him as my brother -- a familiar stranger, perhaps."

Kirk shook his head. "There's more than that, Spock. I saw your face when Sybok jumped into that beam of power or whatever it was. There was pain in your face -- and in your voice."

Spock's eyes dropped again. "Yes," he said quietly.

"So you weren't unaffected," Kirk prompted.

Spock shook his head. "No, I was not unaffected, but not for the reason you think." He drew in a deep breath. "I saw a man's dream die, Jim, and for the first time in my life I understood what that meant."

"Is that what you were thinking about when you said you had lost a brother?" Kirk asked.

"Partly," Spock admitted. He looked back up at Kirk. "I was also remembering what a friend must have thought about my actions concerning Sybok. I disobeyed direct orders -- I almost got us killed." He drew in a shuddering breath. "I lost your trust."

Kirk sat stunned for a moment, then stood up and moved in front of the Vulcan. "No, Spock," he said firmly, "never that. I was angry, yes, and confused. But you never lost my trust."

The Vulcan's eyes met Kirk's, and Kirk cringed at the hurt that was mirrored there. "Are you sure?" he asked in a strained voice. "It was you who said either I was with you, or I was not. That does not sound like trust to me."

Kirk kicked himself mentally. He remembered the look of hurt that had appeared in the Vulcan's eyes, and his quiet and heartfelt response -- I am here, Captain. His anger had not allowed him to hear that plea for understanding, and he suddenly realized how his own response must have cut through to the soul.

Kirk started to reach out to touch Spock's shoulder, then drew back. It was not time. There was too much yet unresolved. "Spock," he said gently, "I was angry. You know how unreasonable I can be when I'm mad. You've certainly borne the brunt of it over the years. It's just that I didn't understand, and you weren't explaining yourself very well. You have to believe that I never stopped trusting you. I was just hurt because it seemed that Sybok meant more to you than I did.... "

Sybok meant more to you than I did. The words sent a chill through Spock, another new feeling to put with the others. Spock's look of hurt turned to one of astonishment. "Jim, you could not think... surely you did not.... " Spock could not think of the proper words.

Kirk laughed softly. "See how insecure I've become since I lost you? Khan took more from me than he realized."

"But I.... "

Kirk shook his head, finally reaching out to give Spock's shoulder a quick squeeze, causing another surge of emotion to flow through the Vulcan. "Sybok forced you and Bones to release emotions you had long since buried, yet I refused to go along with his little game. I was ashamed that if you knew what I had been hiding all these years that you would think less of me.... "

"Jim.... "

"No, let me talk., Maybe it's time I faced reality myself." Kirk turned and walked to the other side of the room. Now was not the time to be near the Vulcan, not when he was about to inflict more suffering. "Unlike you, I was spared pain in my life. I was the wonder-boy of Starfleet. Everything came easily to me. I wanted to be a starship captain and nothing was going to stand in my way. I guess, looking back, that I never let anything interfere with my pursuit of that goal. I never got close to anyone during that time, not for long, anyway. There was always that goal in my future, and people went in and out of my life almost unnoticed at times." He stopped and turned back to look at Spock. "Then it happened. I received command of a starship, and I met you. It changed my whole life, Spock. I took you on as a challenge. I had been told that you were unapproachable, loyal but distant, and I made a bet with myself that I could find your Achilles heel." He fell silent for a long time, then walked back and stood in front of Spock. "In doing so, I found my own."

"This is what you would not let Sybok show you?"

Kirk nodded. "I know I can be single-minded bastard. That doesn't bother me, and I don't think it would diminish me in your sight. But I didn't want you to know I once only considered you a challenge. I have hurt you so often -- I didn't want to do it again when you were so vulnerable."

"I believe Spock already knew, Jim," came a voice from behind them.

Kirk spun around to see McCoy standing there, a small smile on his face. "Bones, how long have you been standing there?"

"Oh, since somewhere around facing reality," McCoy replied as he walked forward. "Koord's regained consciousness and has assured me that he isn't planning on dying anytime soon." He glanced at Spock, then looked back at Kirk. "I had a feeling the two of you were planning on trying some amateur psychology and might need my help.... " He cocked an eyebrow. "Well?"

Kirk shrugged. "You're the doctor," he said lamely.

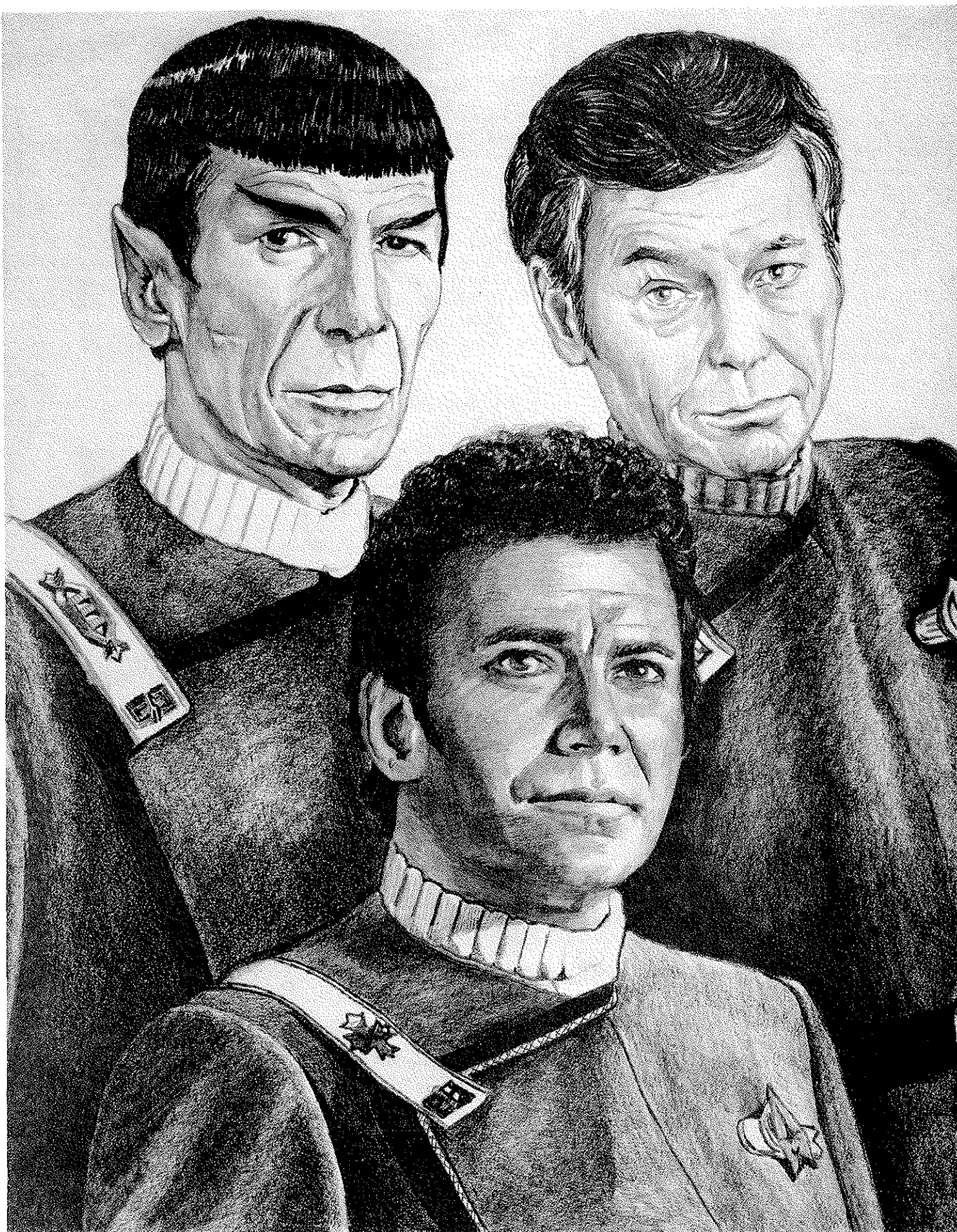
"Last I noticed," McCoy agreed. He looked at Kirk. "Your analysis is a bit flawed. Sybok did not point out pain that we dealt out to others, even if it was only by omission. He was interested in the pain that we received ourselves. You were careful as your career evolved, Jim. There wasn't much in your life that dealt that sort of hurt. Your father died, but you had never been that close to him. Your brother died, but as I recall, the two of you had never been that close either. You never allowed yourself to get too involved with anyone, not even Carol Marcus.... "

"It hurt when David died," Kirk pointed out defensively.

"Not as much as when you destroyed the Enterprise," McCoy countered.

Kirk was silent for a moment. "No," he admitted finally. "But I never had a chance to know him.... "

"Because you never allowed yourself to know him," McCoy pointed out gently. "Maybe Carol Marcus didn't want you near him, but you were his father -- you might have been able to find a way if you had really wanted to."



Kirk finally nodded, but he did not say anything.

"Pain first entered your life when you took command of the Enterprise," McCoy continued. "You had it made -- youngest captain in the Fleet, and the best. You experienced the loneliness of command, and you found yourself really reaching out for the first time in your life. You admitted you were vulnerable and needed a friend. There happened to be someone who was equally vulnerable who answered you. Back then you were still insulated, and as long as you had the arrogance of youth, you could still detach yourself. You could still ask that person to sacrifice his life if it became necessary.... "

"I couldn't do that now," Kirk said in a whisper.

McCoy shook his head. "You could if you had to, Jim. You haven't lost your ability to command. But both Spock and I know how much it would hurt you to do it. Why do you think Spock didn't tell you he was going down to engineering after it was discovered that the Genesis device was going to explode.... "

"I assure you, Doctor, that I did not go down to the engine room planning to die," Spock said dryly.

"I'm sure you didn't," McCoy agreed, "but you knew you could be walking into a dangerous situation. You also knew if you had said something to Jim, he would have ordered you to stay on the bridge and gone in your place."

Spock remained silent, unable to refute McCoy's statement.

McCoy nodded. "Your pain is in your dependency on your friends, Jim." McCoy said softly. "That's why when we got on that philosophical bent back in the park on shore leave that you stated that you've always known that you'll die alone. When you were young, death was not something you thought of, so you never had to depend on anyone except yourself. Reaching out like you did for something more than superficial friendship has changed you, Jim, and it has changed you for the better."

Kirk was silent for a long time, then he finally looked at McCoy. "It doesn't seem like much compared to what you and Spock went through."

McCoy shook his head. "You're wrong there," he said softly. "What Sybok dragged from us we've had years to deal with. Yours is a daily bruising -- a daily reminder of what you stand to lose -- and could lose if you are Human and make the mistakes that all Humans make. Your talk of knowing that you'll die alone is a very Human desire that if it has to happen, at least you will not be the cause of our deaths.... "

"I hadn't thought of it like that," Kirk admitted.

"I know," McCoy said. "I could see that back in Yosemite. Maybe now you will stop taking such wild risks? The thought of losing us may be painful to you, but watching you is no picnic for us either."

Kirk suddenly remembered baiting Klaa earlier and almost mentioned it to McCoy, then decided against it. There would be plenty of time later when they were back on their interrupted vacation -- plenty of time for everything. "Okay, Bones, we'll call a truce," he said with a grin.

"Sounds good to me," McCoy said, understanding Kirk's sudden levity. He needed time to become comfortable with what had just been discussed, time to realize that his supposed frailties were no worse than anyone else's -- that he was no less the

commanding officer simply because he was honest enough to express emotion. He reached out and clapped Kirk on the shoulder. "Now can I coerce the two of you to accompany me to sickbay?"

"I assure you that I am fine, Doctor," Spock protested. "Someone must be on the bridge to see us home safely."

"Bull," McCoy snorted. "Sulu's plenty experienced, and I believe that he has been left in command. You are injured, Spock, don't think I've forgotten about it. I just haven't been after you as much as Jim because I knew your injuries would not hinder your performance, unlike your captain here."

Kirk looked at Spock, a grin crossing his face. "I think we've pushed him as far as we can, Spock. I don't think he's in the mood to argue. Besides, we've got more shore leave waiting for us and it might be a good idea to be fully recovered before we hit El Capitan again."

"Jim, you wouldn't!" McCoy was aghast.

A teasing twinkle sparkled in Kirk's eyes. "Just try me, Doctor," he said with a grin.

"If you even think about it, you'll find yourself spending the rest of shore leave in sickbay tied in restraints!" McCoy threatened.

Kirk looked at him for a few minutes, then he shook his head. "All right, I promise," he said, then sobered slightly. "It's odd, but I don't seem to have the same burning desire to try it again, not like I had." He looked over at Spock. "Come on, let's make McCoy happy."

"Very well, Captain," Spock said in a resigned voice as he rose to his feet.

"Lead on, Bones," Kirk said with a gallant bow, but there was no missing the paling face as Kirk straightened up again.

"You might not want to come once you find out what's waiting for you," McCoy said as he put out a steadying hand, giving Kirk a moment to recover and regain control.

Kirk hesitated. "You've found the problem?" he asked.

McCoy nodded. "I've known what the problem was all along — radiation poisoning. Most unexplained problems in this galaxy of ours are some sort of radiation poisoning. That's the one thing man's body will never get used to. We're not compatible with that kind of energy."

"Is that why I'm not healing?" Kirk asked.

"It is," McCoy answered. "Spock's copper blood cells don't mind this particular type of radiation, but your blood cells are a little mixed up and keep attacking the healthy tissue instead of healing the injured areas." He saw alarm in the Captain's eyes, and felt a momentary satisfaction that he had finally managed to get some kind of a reaction from Kirk. "Don't worry," he said finally, "it's easy to fix, but you're not going to like the treatment much. Because of the extent of the damage, I'm going to have to use a rather old-fashioned intravenous hookup so I can monitor the amount of chemicals

your system will be absorbing. The right amount will cure, the wrong amount will make you sicker than a dog. It's similar to the kind of treatment they used on a deadly disease back on Earth in the late twentieth century. The disease was eradicated years ago, but some of the treatments still come in handy now and again."

"And I'm a now and again," Kirk said glumly.

McCoy grinned. "I'm afraid so. Don't worry, Captain, you probably can't feel much worse than you do right now, and if I can keep you still for about ten hours, you'll be fit and feisty for our shore leave. Just think of it as the price of admission back to Yosemite."

"Would you like me to stay with you, Jim?" Spock asked. "Perhaps the Doctor would allow us to play some chess. It is something you could do while lying flat on your back, and it might help pass the time."

"Can we, Bones?" Kirk asked, a hopeful look slowly replacing the uncertain one that had been there moments before.

"Don't see why not," McCoy said.

"I will go and get the set," Spock said and headed off down the corridor.

By the time Spock arrived at sickbay, McCoy already had Kirk settled in one of the beds and was just adjusting the time release mechanism of the hypospray that was angled against Kirk's wrist, making sure the contact of the hypo was snug against Kirk's skin. He went into his office and came back with a small bucket-like container. "Just in case," he said cheerily. "Sometimes this stuff can make you feel pretty sick."

"Thanks a bunch," Kirk said, looking at the container.

"Forewarned is forearmed," McCoy answered as he put it down beside Kirk's bed. Spock already had the chessmen set up. "Well, I'll leave you two to your game. I'll be in and out to check up on you, Jim, but yell at anytime if you should need me." He put his hand on Kirk's shoulder. "You'll be on the bridge for docking maneuvers, Captain, and you'll be there healthy, I guarantee it.... "

Kirk looked up at him. "Thanks, Bones."

McCoy nodded. He had come up with the answer this time, but he knew at some point in Kirk's life he might not have the answer when he needed it, just as it had once happened with Spock, and the thought of that moment frightened him. For now, he had managed to stay one step ahead of his self-destructive friend, and he would momentarily bask in the glow of that effort. There would be time later for the worry to come back. "Go on," he said, "get started with your game. It's been a long time since I've seen Spock froth at the mouth over your illogical approach to chess, and I'm looking forward to it."

Spock looked up. "I assure you, Doctor, that I have never frothed in my life!"

"No?" McCoy said. "Just wait, Spock, just wait."

While Spock stared at McCoy, Kirk reached out and made the first move, then settled back against the pillows, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. If McCoy wanted Spock to throw a fit, he would make sure that it happened. For him, too, it had been a long time.



